

Start a War

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Start a War

by [nymja](#)

Summary

It takes three hundred years to love him.

Notes

I loved the book, but I'm sure I'm not the only one who wanted things to go more Darkling, so here's an alternative ending where Alina's final amplifier doesn't work out as planned (Yes= stabbing the Darkling, Mal dying. No= Mal reviving, the Darkling dying, Alina losing her power). Lots of inspiration from The Death of Koschei the Deathless and Deathless by Catherynne Valente.

Three parts, will be updated quickly!

Prologue: First War

o.

It may well take me another lifetime to break you, Alina, but I will put my mind to the task.

i.

What happens at the end of their first war is hard to see as a comprehensive whole. Because memories, like stories, don't always arrange themselves the same way when they are revisited.

When Alina Starkov- who becomes Sankta Alina, who becomes Tsaritsa Lantsov, who becomes the new Morozova, who becomes Sankta once again- thinks upon their first ending, it is made of pieces. It is made of shattered things, like the mirrored discs forged by someone she had once called a friend. The edges are too rough to ever tell the complete truth, but they are enough to hold the reflections of people she knew she must have loved.

When Aleksander Morozova- who was the Black Heretic, who is the Darkling, who has lost more names than most men have years- thinks upon their first ending, it is only a sliver. A moment he has allowed to burrow under his skin, if only because he knows it will be purged. Of the millions of memories the Darkling holds, this is one he will gladly abandon in the centuries to come.

What the Sankta remembers about the end of their first war is this:

She ruined her heart for power.

She lost.

What the Darkling knows of the end of their first war is this:

He won.

He almost ruined his power for heart.

--

It takes three hundred years to love him.

ii.

Before the Sankta remembered it as their first war, Alina Starkov thought she was living in an ending. She wore the death of Mal Orestev like a brick on her chest, and with every breath she felt it press deeper into her skin. She thought about Morozova and his otkazat'sya daughter. Of what it would be like to be held in chains. Of what it would be like to drown. She held the sun in her palms as she thought about holding a knife to her wrist. She thought of oak trees that were burned down, of seeing the toes of beaten dress shoes graze the top of the ground.

And she thought of Baghra. Of loving, and not having enough.

--

The Darkling was familiar with shadows, so it was there he stayed as he recovered from the battle that should have killed them both. Because he knew this wasn't an ending, for they were beyond endings. No matter how many ways Alina tried to move forward, creatures like them were meant for circles- endless, *balanced*. And he was patient. He was familiar with his death. He had died a thousand times before this one. He would die a thousand more. So it was nothing, to wear it like a cloak as he waited.

The Darkling did not care about the death of Mal Orestev. He wore it like a thorn in his shoe. He wore it like a badge.

--

Time heals all things. Even broken hearts. Though they, like memories and stories, are not the same once they have been left. And the heart of Alina Starkov is no different. Part of her is with Mal Orestev. Part of her burned away. Part of her is with the stag, the serpent, and yes, even the Darkling. Even still.

It takes time, but she is starting to find new parts. They are not meant to replace the pieces that are gone, but they manage to fill the empty spaces. They manage to keep her heart beating.

Alina Starkov has Misha, who follows her like a ghost. Who asks her about cartography. Who still manages to smile and play, and she looks at him and smiles. Because he is like Mal, and he is of Keramzin even though Keramzin is burned to the ground. She likes that there can still be ghosts from it. Misha is part of Mal, part of Baghra, and part of Keramzin. But Misha is also still Misha. Misha is hope.

And she also has Genya, who braids her hair. Who makes her tea. Who was ruined, but has moved through it, who is made of a metal stronger than the casings that held it together. Who forced Alina out into the sun when she was sitting in her room. Who reminded Alina to dance. Who gently held her hand so it couldn't hold a knife. Genya is faith.

And even though Mal is gone, Alina still has love. She has Tamar and Tolya, Nadia, and Adrik, David and Zoya. The Soldat Sol. Somehow, despite being a saint, despite being a monster, Alina has those she could call friends. It is in them that Alina finds the strength to keep moving. To continue forward. To wear the death of Mal Orestev less like a brick, and more like armor. It is heavy, but she can breathe against it.

...And there is Nikolai Lantsov. Who is also picking up new parts for the ones that are gone. Who wears gloves, even in the summer. Who gives her a position on his council. Who will not take back the emerald, no matter how many times Alina offers it to him.

It takes three years, of time, of healing, of wearing Mal like armor, before Alina starts to wonder if that emerald is the part of Nikolai that belongs to her.

--

Time heals all things. Even shadows. Even armies.

Even the tether between them, which he searches for every night they are apart. It's closed to him now, but every attempt gets him nearer to her thoughts, to her power, to the parts of her that are for him, to the parts of him that are for her.

He wears her absence like a lock, one that will eventually have a key.

--

They still call her Sankta. They say she killed the Darkling.

She feels that part of her missing, but she also knows they never found a body.

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They don't call him Darkling. They don't call him anything.

He has hidden himself before. And he has always returned stronger for it.

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Nikolai proposes seven different times, in seven different ways, but Alina says no the same.

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His chest knits together. He has a scar of her now, and its placement is fitting.

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It takes two more years, of time, of healing, of wearing Mal like armor, before Alina contemplates what it would mean to be a Tsaritsa. To help rebuild a country. If it matters that she is marrying more for the love of Ravka than for the love of a man. Of what Mal would want her to do.

--

As someone alone, he is left with thoughts for company. He thinks of many things, because time has given him many things to think about. He remembers Alina, beside him in the Little Palace, her kefta black and gold and even then—a saint trying to be a mouse—she is his equal. He remembers the way her lips moved around his name, the way the syllables falling off her tongue allowed her fingers to wrap around his heart. How she had shone, even in the dark. How it didn't matter if it wasn't real, as long as he could taste her pulse beating against her neck.

He thinks of an old woman, who earned her eyes but not her fall. He thinks of a boy, who once earned her love. He thinks of how someone so powerful was reduced to something so broken at the base of a mountain. Driven by love. Driven to death.

Time gives him many things to think about.

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When Nikolai proposes for the eighth time, he takes Alina out to the monastery. Where they saw the stars falling from the sky. He gets down on one knee, and holds her hand between his. They are ungloved, and scarred, and ugly. It is the first time she's seen them since...

He asks if he is humble enough yet. She shakes her head at the improbability, but smiles.

He says he knows if he stood by former promises, he would never be able to kiss her. She nods, and her eyes water.

He states that this will help unite Ravka. She agrees that it will.

He says that kings, like privateers, are good for breaking promises. And she lets him kiss her knuckles.

He tells her he is fine with her heart belonging to a ghost, as long as she tries to remain among the living for as long as she can. No one likes the dead saints anyways, and he doesn't feel like commissioning a statue in her honor just yet. She sobs.

He asks her to marry him. This time she says yes.

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The first time they speak after she sinks a dagger into his chest is at her wedding.

Tsaritsa

Chapter Notes

This chapter definitely got away from me (22 pages???), and is therefore a lot longer than the first part. Let me know if I should split it into two parts! Also there are a few character deaths 8(.

Nikolai and Alina's wedding ceremony is based off a program I found online for the wedding of Alexandra and Nicholas II (it was a ridiculously complicated affair), and my Russian is nonexistent, so I apologize in advance if I butchered any spellings or phrases.

Genya is attempting a fourth elaborate hairstyle on her when Alina has a moment of revelation: she does not care for weddings.

At least, not royal weddings. And even today, when her mind should only be on one man, she finds it instead on three. She twists the Lantsov emerald on her finger, and dreams of the impossible wedding she might have had with Mal, whose death she now wears like a necklace instead of armor. It's never taken off, but it is now a hidden thing, and kept close to heart.

They would have had a ceremony in Keramzin, just the two of them and an official. They would wear their usual uniform and kefta. They would have said vows they already knew. Later, maybe, they would have had nicer cakes and perhaps a stronger tea if only to show that the day was important despite how beautifully unimportant it seemed.

But there is no more Mal. And there is no more Keramzin. The thought is sobering and leads her to thinking about the second man. They are pervasive thoughts, ones she doesn't want, but they slink in her mind between the pins that Genya expertly snaps into her white hair. Had Alina stayed that night, would she be here with the Darkling instead? And how might that have ended, with her collared and blinded? With a grisha sitting on the throne instead of a privateer?

There are two thrones on that dais...

Alina snorts, and dismisses the thought as she fiddles with a thread of gold embroidery on her sleeve. *That* ceremony, she is sure, would have been short.

"I'm starting to feel foolish," Genya mutters, her scarred mouth full of pins as she grabs another chunk of Alina's hair. "All this work for something going under a brocade veil."

Alina allows herself to smile. Allows herself to, for a moment, put aside thoughts of Mal and fears of the Darkling, and just be something close to alive. "You'd still know what's under it, and it would bother you regardless."

Genya laughs. "You're right. And perhaps I just need something to keep me busy."

Alina cranes her head over her neck in order to fully demonstrate her amazement at the sentence. Genya swats her for interrupting the third elaborate braid she's constructing. Weddings are exhausting affairs. Weddings between living saints and clever tsars even more so. For months,

arrangements and plans have been put into action, and Nikolai had attacked every obstacle of the wedding with the same relentlessness he puts into planning a siege.

Seating charts were constructed based on political affiliations. Color palettes of linens selected based on the colors of Ravka, the Lantsov line, the grisha, and the Sol. Music selections for the reception at the Little Palace afterwards were based on cultural heritage, with one or two Fjerdan and Shu numbers thrown in for the invited dignitaries. Alina has five customized kefta she is to wear today, commissioned by the finest tailors throughout all of Ravka. She's already certain that Nikolai is going to change his military dress every hour, and suspects he enjoys this sort of revelry and parading more than she ever could. It was as they said: sharks are born swimming.

But Alina is not a shark. She decided some time ago to keep herself ignorant to such things, only suffering the etiquette training as a gesture of kindness to Nikolai. Instead, she keeps to the grisha, teaching the twenty three rescued students what she can with Genya, David, and Zoya. She's never had a mind for politics, and isn't about to start playing the game at her wedding of all things.

Genya gives a sad, little twist to her lips. "Oh no, trust me, our good *Tsar* Nikolai has made certain that I participated in the arrangements for today." Her fine fingers begin to thread the final braid of Alina's hairstyle, and she makes sure it's in a manner that won't be ruined by wearing a crown. "But that's like breathing, and gives my mind too much rest. Which means too many thoughts."

"What's wrong?"

Genya swats her again as she smooths her hands over Alina's finalized style. The pins are gold and catch the light like mirrors. "Don't start. This is supposed to be a happy day."

Alina can never tell when Genya is lying.

Her friend hands her a mirror to look at her hair. "You look like a *Tsaritsa*."

Or when Genya's telling the truth.

Alina never learns the thoughts that haunted Genya on her wedding day. Never knows that Genya was thinking of how she was once a confidante to a Lantsov queen, how she was once loved and then tossed aside. Never realizes that Genya is carrying the guilt for Alina's ruined life with Mal like Alina carries his death.

The ceremony is five hours long, and miserable for almost all of it. It begins with a salvo of twenty-one cannons being fired: a loud, thunderous noise that reminds Alina of how her marriage owes its origins to war. It fits, but she wishes it didn't.

Then there is a processional into the Little Palace, even though they were all living within the Little Palace to begin with. The courtyard is flooded with the people of Ravka, as is to be expected of the wedding between a *Tsar* and *Sankta*. The crowds are parted by a red carpet that starts with the carriages and ends at the altar within the Palace where they will exchange their vows. Alina watches the people first, before looking at the dignitaries exiting the carriages or trying to see if Nikolai is already inside. She is startled to find that most have happy tears in their eyes. That all are glad of this day. While she is not afraid of the ceremony, or the marriage, it helps her nerves to see that maybe it is true, what her and Nikolai believed. Maybe together they will help heal their country.

When the processional begins, the Apparat leads, with some religious book held over his head as if it could catch the rays of the sun. She hopes it is not a Morozova journal. Behind him are Alina's *Soldat Sol*, her sunburst embroidered in shining gold on the fronts of their navy blue kefta. She is happy to see Tamar and Tolya immediately flanking the Apparat, happier still to see that their presence makes cold beads of sweat fall down his forehead. The man who is to be her husband has a wicked streak of humor, evident even in his processional arrangements.

After the Apparat, the members of Nikolai's Council follow. They are all grim and rigid, firmly pressed men and women in firmly pressed uniforms. Alina knows they are inherited, much like the Palace and the emerald, and thinks it could be entertaining to see them under the thumb of a too-clever fox.

After the Council, Alina watches the representatives of the Grisha, and they, unlike the Council, make her heart warm. Genya is dashing and terrifying in her embroidered eyepatch and red kefta, Zoya stunning and imposing in her blue one, and David has managed to brush through his hair. These are the people she will lead, and the people she will protect. Watching them feels like pride.

Then comes the representative color guard of the First Army. And seeing them march resolutely, carrying the banners and wearing the military dress, makes her heart ache and her eyes water. Misha has an honorary place in front, his wooden sword still on his hip. These are the people she will protect for Mal.

After the soldiers come the dignitaries, people from Fjerda and Shu and elsewhere. Honored guests she has not bothered to learn the names of, though Nikolai no doubt knows strange details about all of them—like that the Shu diplomat hates caviar but loves to waltz. They are followed by members of Nikolai's court, all attended by servants.

There is a noticeable absence in the procession where their parents should be, but then it is Alina's turn.

She is assisted out of the carriage, because for the ceremony she is wearing the traditional garb of a *Tsaritsa* and not a kefta, and the moment she steps forward, she hears everything go quiet. Alina swallows tightly, grips the hand of her first attendant—Nadia, because it is more important for Genya to be seen as a Grisha instead of a servant today—and realizes that all the fear she has not felt in five years has chosen this moment to manifest itself.

A hush falls over the crowd. Their heads bow, they drop to a knee.

Alina takes a step, and tries to keep breathing. She's never felt comfortable like this. The band nearby plays one of the local hymns she remembers from growing up in Keramzin as she walks. And Alina feels a strong surge of genuine affection for Nikolai, who chose every piece of music for the ceremony.

Though the affection is tampered with irritability. Because the processional walk is nearly a kilometer long in Nikolai's zeal for theatrics, and it is the longest kilometer she has ever walked. When she can take no more of the revered silence, the hushed whispers, and the eyes on the ground, Alina closes her eyes and feels the connection between her and the sun. And she makes it dance.

Sunlight streams through the air, twirling and cascading down around the heads of the people of Ravka. Awed whispers replace the silence, and eventually she hears some of the children laughing as her power circles around them. Hears people cheer *Sankta!* as she continues past them.

The cheers make her smile, despite herself. She is a grisha first, a *Tsaritsa* second, and it feels good

to make that distinction today. It feels nice to be Alina as she walks into her marriage. To use her power for something other than the Cut.

Alina does not see a grey-eyed man standing in the crowd, face drawn somber behind the laughing children and cheering adults.

Because palace doors close behind her and she does not look back.

When she walks into the Little Palace, Nikolai is standing at the end of the red carpet in full military dress. He is handsome, but more importantly, when their eyes meet he is smiling at her like she is the only one in the room.

Alina did not think she would ever see someone look at her like that again. He grabs her hand in his gloved one, and kisses it before they both kneel before the Apparat to exchange their vows.

He also jabs an elbow playfully into her side when she starts to doze off. Royal weddings are tedious things, and she has already listened to the Apparat drone on for two hours.

When he kisses her to finalize their union, she only thinks a little of Mal, of what it would be like if it were him instead. But she mostly thinks of Nikolai, and how they are going to heal together.

Fifty-one cannons sound. The marriage is complete, and she is no longer Alina Starkov, but *Tsaritsa Lantsov*.

Royal weddings are tedious affairs, but royal receptions have a little more enthusiasm to them. Alina is finally able to change into one of her elaborate but more comfortable kefta, and Nikolai has changed outfits no less than seven times. The dinner is elegant, and pleasing to nearly every palate, and it does not take long for cold vodka and kvass to be served and for dancing to begin.

As the newly wedded couple, she and Nikolai have the first waltz. He is, of course, much better at it than she is.

“Don’t worry, *moya zhena*, I won’t embarrass you too badly,” he whispers as he glides her across the floor. “Though I have to admit, my reputation at all the social circles is going to suffer greatly if you keep going off tempo.”

Alina laughs. It feels like the first laugh she’s had in years, and her fingers tighten around his hand. “Be happy I’m not scuffing the leather of your fine boots with my feet.”

Nikolai smirks, and leans down near her ear. “Don’t you dare. These boots were expensive. *Hand-stitched*.”

“Whatever happened to having an obscene amount of money?”

“I’ve just lost half of it to a horrible dancer.”

He spins her just as she rolls her eyes. “Hard to imagine why it took eight proposals.”

Nikolai smiles, but it’s tinged with sadness, because he knows why it truly took eight times. But he can play around the ghost between them. “Maybe I just like proposing.”

“I think you prefer planning weddings.”

“Much more than you like attending them, if the snores in the middle of the Apparát’s sermon are anything to go by.”

Alina returns the smile, eyes meeting his and something softens within her as the song begins to near its conclusion. “The people seemed happy, about us.”

Nikolai’s expression softens as well, hearing what Alina isn’t saying as he gently curls a finger under her chin, tipping it up. “What isn’t there to be happy about? It’s not everyday two beautiful, powerful individuals get married to eventually produce devastatingly attractive children.”

She shakes her head, leaning her forehead to rest against his chest as the song ends. His hands wrap around her waist. “Thank you, Nikolai.”

He presses a kiss to the top of her head. “I am your friend, Alina. And while I hope one day you will allow me to be more to you, please don’t forget that my affection is grounded in something besides Ravka.”

Alina closes her eyes and tries to keep her voice from catching. “...I bet you say that to all of your wives.”

“Only the ones with half my money.”

The band begins to play another song, and Nikolai bows to her as she musters a pathetic excuse for a curtsy in return. Amusement flashes across his fox-like face, and he goes to speak, before Alina is tapped on the shoulder.

She turns, and an older man in a waistcoat stands before her, giving a half bow and offering his hand. “If I might have a dance with the new *Tsaritsa*?”

Alina winces, and tries to place his face. He is one of Nikolai’s Council.

Nikolai laughs, and she knows it is at her expense. “Of course, *Gospodin* Kosoglad. It would be greedy of me to hog such a beautiful wife all evening.”

Alina takes Kosoglad’s hand and tries not to sigh. It appears her royal duties would start earlier than anticipated.

As she dances, she feels a pull at the back of her mind, but when she looks into the crowd she only sees happy wedding guests.

The dancing continues throughout the reception, and though Alina does not realize it, with every waltz she is being drawn further and further from the center of the ballroom. It is not until she is near a dark corridor that a different hand seamlessly replaces that of Duke Abelev’s as the music changes to a slower song.

Alina is too focused on her feet, on keeping tempo, to notice that she has a new partner until she hears his voice and her heart stops in her chest.

“*Tsaritsa*.”

Alina's mouth goes dry, and she looks up to stare into grey eyes.

The Darkling holds her hand gently in his, like he's cradling an egg. But the other is placed on her hip with bruising finger tips. For a moment, they just stare at each other. The dead man and the woman who killed him. The pull in the back of her mind thrums like a dam waiting to be broken, and she wonders how he has been alive for the last seven years and she has not been able to tell. She wonders why she is not surprised to see him here, in the Little Palace, once again.

She wonders why she is not calling for help.

"You don't seem surprised," the Darkling says in a low voice, the thumb of the hand holding hers ghosting over her knuckles.

"You don't seem dead," she whispers, and she cannot stop looking at him. He hasn't changed, but then again, neither has she.

"Greater weapons than a blade have been used against me."

"Are you here for revenge?"

The Darkling smiles, and the fingers on her hip press in a little deeper. "One day, perhaps. But not this one."

"Then why are you here?"

"Would you believe that I've missed you?"

"No."

"I have."

He starts to move their bodies along to the waltz, though there is no one to see them in the shadows and therefore no need to keep up pretenses. It's enough to make Alina wonder if she's gone mad.

"I put a knife into your chest."

"I have already told you that I am not here for revenge tonight."

Grief hits her hard in that moment. Because he is here, somehow. He is here and Mal is not. And that can only mean that Mal is gone for nothing but the blood on her hands. She staggers in his hold, but his only response is to gently correct their timing. They move for a few steps, before he speaks again.

"Does this make you a peninsula, Alina?"

She wants to be sick. She wants to be surprised that he remembers an exchange from what feels like a lifetime ago. "Don't."

"I suppose an otkazat'sya king is more suitable than an otkazat'sya tracker."

"Don't."

"Though equally as weak."

She tries to rip her hand out of his grip, but he holds her firmly against him.

“Or do I need to remind you that all otkazat’sya husbands come and go, Alina?” The Darkling looks down at her, and she hates that even though there is mostly irritation in his gaze, there is also pity. “And that you will see this one leave just as easily as your tracker, even if he wears a crown?”

Alina doesn’t want to listen to him. Doesn’t want to know that he is right. That some part of her already knows she will outlive Nikolai, and any other person, besides one. “We’ll have decades-“

“And you and I will have centuries,” he whispers. “You and I have forever.”

Alina shakes her head. “You and I have nothing but war.”

The Darkling looks at her and it finally registers that he’s not here. That the Darkling is not in the Little Palace, but far away somewhere else. That he can’t see beyond the space she inhabits. That this is a call of like to like. That he has somehow managed to restore their bond.

Her stomach twists. And even now, she’s not sure if it’s in anticipation or fear.

The Darkling leans forward, and she feels his lips press against the shell of her ear, feels their connection resurfacing. His next words are whispers, promises that hang between them. “Before I leave, I want you to know something.”

She wants to rip her hand out of his. She wants to scream. She wants to let the world around her know about this dark, hidden *thing* between them. But she can’t leave him. “What.”

“That I do not mind waiting for you, Alina Starkov.” He kneels then, and the dread in her heart is so strong she can’t hear anything but her blood rushing in her ears. And she doesn’t resist when he presses his lips against her knuckles, in the exact same way Nikolai did when he proposed. She doesn’t believe it’s a coincidence.

Lips against her skin, he continues: “I could kill one hundred otkazat’sya men. I can let time kill one hundred otkazat’sya men. The end result will be the same.”

She throws her hand back, as if she has just realized that it was held in the fire for too long. “You will *not* kill Nikolai,” Alina hisses coldly.

The Darkling stays kneeling. “No. I have decided I will not kill this one, because he has the potential to suit a purpose.” A bitter smile crosses his features. “Consider it my wedding gift to you, *Sol-nyshka moyo*. This one, I will let you watch die. And then you can know what it feels like to be powerless. You can see with your own eyes how the otkazat’sya are not enough, will never be enough. How there is only one other like you, and though it may take one hundred years, or a hundred otkazat’skya husbands, everything your heart belongs to will fall through the cracks in your fingers like water, until there is only one piece, one part in your grasp.”

He stands, and the corners of his mouth twist up. “Because as I said, if you must know one thing, know that I can be patient, Alina Starkov. I’ve waited more than a hundred lifetimes for you, one more means nothing to me.”

She moves without thinking, drawing her arm down hard.

The flash of her Cut illuminates the darkened hallway, and he is gone.

Alina does not return to her wedding. And though he looks throughout the palace, Nikolai does not find her until he sees her sitting in his rooms. His new wife offers no explanation as she wordlessly

and ardently takes him to bed. And later he does not ask for one.

The Darkling does not visit her for another three years.

iv.

Time heals all things. Even restlessness.

The tether between them is strong as ever, but Alina does not go to him, and he does not go to her. She passes the days being wary of the shadows, and practicing her summoning. The amplifiers give her strength over him, and it's something that lets her manage the first few months of her reign. Because it's Mal, watching out for her as always.

After months of feeling him, but not seeing him, she tells Nikolai about their connection resurfacing. She does not tell him about their wedding night.

The *Tsar* of Ravka assembles a task force to search, but they both know that the Darkling will only be found when he wants to. Security increases, but they both know the Darkling will arrive when he wants.

They do not tell the public. Because Ravka is in shambles and what it needs to grow back together is hope.

When a year passes, with the task force finding nothing and the shadows not stirring, Alina starts to hope that he is not returning. It's a lie, but it's a lie that lets her live her life as best she can.

In that year, Nikolai and Alina start to bring Ravka from its knees to its feet.

His money and connections as a privateer bring in trade, and his ingenuity helps them develop flying ships that are enough of a discouragement to invading countries. His ability to be a shark helps him form strong political alliances and removes the threat of nobles challenging his claim to the throne. He sends ambassadors to other countries: Tamar and Nadia's sojourn to the Shu nation has been particularly effective in negotiations.

To his wife, he leaves the armies. And Alina changes them. The grisha and the *otkazat'sya* start running drills together. Start learning together. Start sharing the same barracks. The same food. All three branches of the Second Army become equal in standing, and with their new heads of David, Genya and Zoya, progress is made. Power in the army becomes less about hierarchy, and more about brotherhood. She oversees the training, and she makes herself feel as though she has a purpose again.

They reform the First and Second Armies into what Nikolai calls the *Bol'shoy*. There are not enough grisha left to justify an entirely separate army, anyways.

In that year, Nikolai also asks her permission to formally adopt Misha. She agrees, until she finds out that he wants to put him in the line of succession.

“The nobles will never allow it.”

“Nonsense. The nobles will love it.”

And they do. The nobles eat out of the palm of Nikolai’s hand as he spins a tragic story during a press conference. Of how Misha is not just the favorite pupil of his dear wife- who is still a saint, by the way- but a symbol of Ravka born anew. A living representation of how Ravka is in the hands of its people. Misha is accepted into the family with royal enthusiasm. Public opinion of Nikolai skyrockets.

Alina is just happy to see his smiling face when the Apparat begrudgingly proclaims him Misha Lantsov. Happy to give him hope when he did the same for her in her darkest hours.

Proud when Misha joins the Bol’shoy as a junior soldier.

Every night when they’re in bed, Nikolai rolls over and asks if she’s hopelessly in love with him yet.

Alina snorts or rolls her eyes, but every time he asks, her protests grow softer.

The Apparat stays on as an advisor and head of clergy. She goes out of her way to avoid him, only stopping by the order of the Sol to make sure its charitable programs are being followed. They are. The Apparat and Alina have not exchanged more than a handful of words in the eight years since she escaped from his underground base.

Therefore, it’s surprising to her that when he dies, he leaves her his effects. Hundreds of books are delivered to her personal study, with only one note to give any explanation:

A poor saint. A strong queen.

She takes anything relating to Morozova and thinks about burning it. Eventually, she decides instead to store them in the auxiliary library, out of sight and out of mind.

Genya and David marry. They have a healthy son, whom they name Ivan.

On the second anniversary of their wedding, Nikolai blindfolds Alina and throws her in a carriage. He gives no explanation, only that he has a surprise and she is to accompany him on a journey.

She is surprised indeed when he removes the blindfold, because the first thing she sees is an oak tree. Her eyes move to the mansion, to the old house she knows the Darkling has destroyed, and her heart clenches in her chest so tightly she can almost see spots.

Her husband has taken her to Keramzin.

But a Keramzin that is not a burned out husk. The old house has been rebuilt, refurnished and repainted. It is a new and different Keramzin, but it is not a destroyed one. Her breath comes in short inhales as she sees her home as she was sure she would never see it again.

“Not the most traditional of anniversary gifts,” Nikolai says softly beside her, and if she was not frozen in shock, she would hear the uncharacteristically nervous tone in his voice. “But I thought if we are rebuilding Ravka together, it would make sense to start here.”

Alina cannot speak.

“...It doesn’t replace anything, I know that.”

Her eyes flood with tears.

“You’re offended, aren’t you? I can do something about the paint-“

“Nikolai.”

“Alina?”

She has enough time to say, “The paint is perfect,” before she breaks down into sobs, a pain that had been resting on her heart for years finally lessening.

He holds her as she cries.

One week after Keramzin becomes an orphanage again, Nikolai rolls over in bed.

“Are you hopelessly in love with me yet?” He asks, though this time she does notice that his tone is softer.

Alina says nothing, but instead of rolling her eyes or snorting, she kisses him.

Later in the second year of their marriage, Alina gives birth to a daughter. She is small, with wide blue eyes and thick curls of light brown hair.

She’s the most beautiful person Alina has ever seen, and when she holds her for the first time, she feels a new part of her form.

They name her Ana, after the closest thing Alina had to a mother.

v.

Ana is laying in her crib, and Alina is making sunlight dance across the mirrors that hang from the ceiling of her nursery when the Darkling appears to her again. Alina closes her eyes, but keeps her fingers moving, keeps her child cooing in delight as she sits next to her in a rocking chair.

If she had them open, she would see the Darkling staring at her hand, at the sun moving, at the column of her neck, with a look that could only be described as wanting.

“I assume the rumors are true, then.”

His voice is silky and distant. Cold.

Alina shrugs a shoulder, but does not turn to him. "It depends on the rumor."

"You've had a child."

It's been so long, Alina has almost forgotten that the Darkling cannot see beyond her when he comes to her like this. That he doesn't see the crib clearly, only a vague outline of a nursery.

She hears him take a step closer to her, but she doesn't move. He can't hurt either of them like this. But she remembers his promise from ten years ago, the promise of having no shelter but him.

"If you come near her, I will Cut you down."

"I have no desire for either."

"Then why are you here?"

She feels his hand rest on the back of her neck, sweeping away the pieces of loose hair as he kisses her behind the ear. She finally opens her eyes.

"Would you believe that I've missed you?"

"No."

His other hand trails up her arm, resting over the hand that she is using to manipulate the sunlight. He follows her movements like a ghost. Like a shadow. "You're hoping that she's like you. She won't be. There are only the two of us."

Alina curls her fingers into her palm. The light dims in the mirrors. Ana gives a short cry of protest. The Darkling, she realizes, can see her daughter now. He is close enough, and he is touching her.

He is staring at Ana like she's a puzzle he cannot solve.

"...Have you ever had children?" She asks quietly, staring at her daughter as her face wrinkles and she curls into sleep.

"I was never so thoughtless."

Alina stands, and before she knows what she's doing, she's picking Ana up and holding her close to her chest. The Darkling's hands fall off of her as she moves.

"I will never understand why you insist on making such hardship for yourself," the Darkling whispers, watching her face carefully.

Alina doesn't look away from her daughter. "Because that's what keeps me from becoming you."

"Would it really be so terrible, Alina, to be like me?"

She doesn't know, and the temptation is there. Has always been there. But she knows that for the Darkling, having someone love him isn't enough. And it's enough for her. She's convinced herself that it's enough. It has to be enough.

"It would be," Alina finally replies, even though she doubts. "But it's not what I am." Even though she doubts that, too.

"You are still young. What you are will change hundreds of times."

Alina turns to look at him, heart beating faster in defense. “Not like that.”

He sits in her rocking chair, eyes not moving from her own, and apparently bored of the topic. “I will return again. How far will you go to stop me the next time?”

Alina’s fingers clench into Ana’s blanket.

“How much more are you willing to lose?”

She looks down at her daughter. Who looks so much like Nikolai it hurts.

“Alina. How much more are you willing to lose until you understand that it is easier to be beside me, than against me?”

“Get out.”

“You deny yourself what you need to survive. And I won’t always be as forgiving. You won’t always have someone to die for you.”

She moves with intention, the arm not holding her daughter moving down.

The flash of her Cut brightens the nursery, and he is gone.

He returns when Ana is six.

vi.

Time heals all things. Even fear.

The years go by, and there is no sign of the Darkling. Nikolai goes as far as to disband the task force, something that sits uneasily in Alina’s stomach. But he is right in that a rebuilding country needs its resources where they are needed, and not where they will be futile.

Her children grow. Misha joins the Bol’shoi proper. Every day he looks more and more like Mal. Not in his hair or eyes, but in his posture. In his smile. In his need to look after those smaller and weaker than him. Nikolai lets him know every day that he is proud of him, and she sees her husband making up for something he never received. She understands. Because Alina lets Misha know every day that she loves him.

Ana grows as well. She shares almost no similarities with her mother besides her hair, because she grins, and laughs, and causes trouble. Genya and Alina set up play dates between her and Ivan, and it isn’t even an hour before Ivan is crying and Ana is innocently stacking blocks in the corner. Nikolai dotes on her, and Alina is afraid Ana will grow up spoiled and having a preference for only clothes that are immaculately tailored.

Alina grows, too. She has Genya tailor her to age with her husband. She learns as much about politics as she can stomach. She gets closer to being hopelessly in love. She finds her place, even after she thought her place was gone with grisha steel.

On one of their numerous playdates, Ana moves a tide of water from a fountain to splash Ivan by

waving her hand above it.

Alina does not know what she is feeling. Ana is her father's daughter, and like Nikolai, no doubt feels the call of the sea.

And like Nikolai, she is not like her. *There are only the two of us.*

Maybe what she feels is heartbreak.

He comes to her that night, when she is in bed but unable to sleep. He is sitting in a chair in the corner of their room, and his arrival is so sudden that Alina jolts into an upright position in her bed. Beside her, Nikolai mumbles incoherently in his sleep. The Darkling sends him a disdainful glance before he turns to her.

"You are upset."

She looks at him and shakes her head. "Go away."

The Darkling only continues to stare at her, his gaze intense and somehow demanding. She realizes, then, that she is only wearing a light sleeping gown. Alina looks down at her hands, folded into her lap, before she lifts the blanket tighter around her.

The words come out before she can stop them. Because he is the only one she can tell, the only one who would understand. "Ana is a Tidemaker."

The Darkling frowns, tracing his fingers along the armrest of the chair. "Then it is time for you to leave."

Alina winces. "No."

"Why not?"

"They're my family."

"Family," he echoes flatly, "Can be left."

"Not children," she replies, and she gets a dark satisfaction at seeing him flinch. At knowing he is capable of love, and of loss. That he is still Aleksander, somewhere buried deep. A boy with a mother. Human.

It takes him a moment to reply.

"You only have to seek me out, Alina. When you are tired of losing. When you are tired of being naïve."

When she looks up from her hands, he's gone.

Five more years pass. Misha becomes a man. And he becomes a man in love with a dark-haired Squaller who reminds Alina a little too much of Zoya to make her comfortable. But she sees him happy, so she helps Nikolai see to his marriage preparations.

Two years after Misha marries, his wife gives birth to a son. They name him Malyen and it hurts

her in a good way.

One day, after another five years have passed, Alina finally sees her friends growing older. She sees the lock of gray in David's hair, the wrinkles starting to form in the corners of Genya's mouth. The crows' feet in the corners of Nikolai's eyes.

Alina wakes up every morning the same, until she has Genya add wrinkles to match her own. Her friend has never commented on Alina's ageless skin, her still-thick hair. And she thanks her for it silently.

Her son begins to lead the armies in her place. Her daughter learns how to sail a ship. Ivan becomes the new court Tailor under his mother's guidance. Time moves forward for everyone but her.

Three more years pass, and Ana begrudgingly tells her mother that Ivan has decided to surrender and actually propose. Genya sends her a knowing smile, and Nikolai takes the news exceedingly well by only drinking two bottles of vodka with Tolya and David.

Ana makes for a beautiful bride. Ivan gives a rare smile when he sees her walk down the kilometer-long procession, and Alina dutifully holds out a tissue for Genya to cry into.

Ana has a daughter. They name her Vasilia.

Alina searches the shadows every night. When her daughter asks her why, she pretends she never hears the question. Her husband knows better, but stays silent.

One night, years later, she and Nikolai are sitting together in the garden, him with a blanket over his lap, and her with a glass of kvass. The veins on the backs of his hands are more prominent, but Alina doesn't notice. Time is strange that way, where large changes can happen unseen simply because they are the same from day to day. And while Alina knows her husband is now approaching sixty, she does not see a difference in him. Does not acknowledge that his breath is coming in rasps, or that his hair is more grey than blond. That he is seen by the court healers more often.

"You know," he says, and gives her the grin of a much younger man, "You don't need to have Genya change your face every day on my account. I'm very secure in the fact that I'm still the pretty one."

Alina smiles. "Ivan changes my face every day now, actually."

"I thought it looked worse."

She snorts, and throws an elbow playfully into his side.

“I hope you find an ugly man after me,” Nikolai pouts, rubbing his ribs in mock pain.

Alina rolls her eyes. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Why not? If I don’t say something now, you might find a handsome one. And I don’t think my ego could survive that intact.”

“Your ego will outlive us all.”

Nikolai smiles then, but it’s full of grief. “Your hard head might give it a run for its money.”

Alina grabs his hand, and kisses the back of it. The pain in his smile eases, but doesn’t disappear. They both know what lies ahead. And they both know they shouldn’t speak of it any further.

They lose Tolya first, when he is sixty-three. A heart attack. Then Adrik, in a training accident two years later. Tamar and Nadia return from Shu to attend both funerals, and three years later Nadia returns from Shu alone because there is no longer anything there to keep her.

Ana takes over training the grisha from Alina. She is too old, Ana argues, to keep up with the rigorous demands of the position. And Alina wonders why Ivan hides her secret from his wife, from her daughter. Until she thinks about what it would do to Ana if she knew, and then she understands.

Nadia dies the same year that Nikolai develops a chronic cough and Vasilisa gives birth to their first great-grandchild, a boy named Anton.

Nikolai gives Ravka to Misha. The coronation ceremony is just as extravagant, just as tedious, as their wedding so many years ago. Nikolai must have the same thought, because he smiles at her throughout it and jabs an elbow into her side when she begins to doze off. It’s not the jab of his elbow that wakes her, however, but the sound of his heavy, wet coughing as the crown descends on Misha’s head.

She loses Genya that fall. David follows, not even a month after. And the former *Tsaritsa* spends her time looking at the red kefta that Genya had earned so many times over and trying not to break, not to shatter all over the floor like that blue cup from a lifetime ago.

Time heals all things. Even grief.

But grief always comes back.

Nikolai is confined to bed rest three months after David dies. And he is just as difficult of a patient as Alina believed he would be. Soup is sent back for being too hot and then too cold, curtain

changes are requested because the drapery is not in fashion. He desires fifty different books a day but reads none of them. She sits at his side almost every night, and she has since stopped asking Ivan to Tailor her at Nikolai's request.

One night, he grabs her healthy, unveined hand and kisses her knuckles.

"I'm still the pretty one."

Alina smiles. "You are devilishly handsome, and if not for your delicate condition, I would be jumping into bed with you right now."

He laughs, and it's a hoarse, awful sound. Nikolai pats the side next to him. "I'm not that delicate, *moya zhena*."

She rolls her eyes, but climbs into bed. He doesn't release her hand. And as Alina settles under the covers, he brings it to rest over his heart. It beats weakly, and she feels the harsh rattle of his lungs as he inhales. She closes her eyes and tries not to cry.

"So," Nikolai whispers, closing his eyes as well, "Are you hopelessly in love with me yet?"

Alina chokes back a sob. "Of course I am, you foolish man."

He grins. "I thought as much."

He holds her as she cries.

The next week, Nikolai slips away from her like water from a sieve.

vii.

She has been grieving for only six months when she sees him again. The former *Tsaritsa* thought she was out of tears to cry, but when she sees him sitting in the same chair she had once rocked Ana to sleep in, unchanged and still as beautiful and terrible as ever, they come again.

The Darkling sits in the rocking chair like he's a ruler on a throne, one leg resting on the opposite knee and fingers folded contemplatively over his stomach.

She doesn't have the strength to tell him to move. Death has made her tired, and she can't manage the desire to send him away with the Cut.

He just watches her. Grey eyes shining in the dark. He doesn't move, because at the moment he is too afraid to touch her. Touching her is always an exercise in a dark lack of satisfaction—he wants her, but he wants *all* of her, and tonight she could give it to him. But not for the reasons he desires. All this time away from her has made him a greedy man, and if he is to have her, he will have her only the way he wants after waiting for so long. He will accept nothing less. The original desire, the way he had thrown himself at her like a *boy*, is done. Something else has been seeded in his mind, slowly taking root. Something not as forgiving.

He watches as she folds into herself, like a mouse once again. He watches tears crawl down her face and he is *angry*, because he had warned her of this and she had been too stubborn to listen to the voice of experience. Of reason. He is angry that her pain makes him hurt, too.

But he did not come here to be angry. So instead he breathes deeply and leans forward, resisting the urge to cradle her face in his hand.

“They are whispering your name in the Little Palace, Alina. They are whispering about how you have never gone to the doctor. Have never left your quarters since the death of the Lantsov. Some say that they have seen you as you were decades ago.” His eyes dart around the former nursery, where she now sleeps because she cannot go back to the room she shared with Nikolai. “You have gotten careless, and now your shelter is gone.”

Alina closes her eyes as she remembers his words, from so long ago. From Keramzin. He did not need to lift a finger to ruin this one. She hates him, for deciding to remind her now while she is in mourning. And she hates that his words make sense and that they slither onto her bones. That it is time for her to kill Alina Starkov. That she must go, or stay and watch her children die as she had watched her husband and friends fade. But she can’t say anything, and instead just sits on her bed.

The Darkling continues his evaluation of her, committing everything to memory even though Alina does not change. They sit in silence for what feels like an eternity.

His voice is a caress when he finally speaks again, light and dancing on her skin. “Once I gave you a name. Do you remember?”

And Alina is surprised by how calm her voice is. How sure and steady. “Yes.”

He wants to ask her to say it again, but that name is a weakness she carries against him, and tonight he cannot indulge. Because the game is, once again, about to change. “I would like to give you another.”

Alina stares at him, and she feels bone-dry and empty. “You remember what happened the last time you gave me a name, Aleksander.”

The Darkling manages to smile and flinch at the same time. It is always so good and so painful to hear that name. And he has to admire her ruthlessness in using it now. “Even still.”

She takes a deep breath, because she is already a woman who has lost much, too much, and who would soon be losing her life. So tonight it does not pay to keep up pretenses. “What is it.”

One of his fingers traces the arm of the rocking chair, not looking at her as he whispers, “Morozova.”

Alina remembers Baghra’s tale of two little girls. She has not thought about that story in some time.

She hugs her arms around her stomach, and looks around her daughter’s ruined nursery. At the man in front of her who is what makes her whole, even if that sense of completeness means loving the shadows and the dark parts of her. Even if it means accepting the one who guided her into murdering Mal. Who had burned down Keramzin. Of admitting, in her grief, that he is the only one who can understand this sort of loss.

“...Will you take this name, too, Alina?”

Time heals all things. But wounds scar.

She wants to say no, but what comes out instead is, “Not tonight.”

As soon as the words leave her lips she freezes, heart thudding against her chest at the concession

she has just made. The Darkling is an observant man, and she is disgusted at seeing the smile on his face as he finally sits up from the rocking chair.

He gets down on one knee in front of her bed, and uses a hand to thread through her hair as another cups her face towards his.

“Until another night, then. *Sol-nyshka moyo*.”

The fingers in her hair tighten, and Alina closes her eyes. His thumb hovers over her pulse.

When he kisses her, it takes her away. For a moment, Alina Starkov is not in the old nursery, not in the Little Palace that was reclaimed by her and Nikolai decades ago. She is a girl again. She is a mouse. She is dancing with him, light and shadow entwining together as the Sun Summoner and the Darkling unite for a demonstration. She is wanting to ask him to come to her rooms.

Alina tears away from their kiss not even a moment after it starts, and doesn't look at him even though she can feel his heavy breath against her cheeks. Can feel his lips move against her neck as he desperately tries to find that surrender he had but a moment ago. She shakes her head, and stares a hole through the floor.

“But not this night, Aleksander.”

He tries one more time to reclaim her mouth for his own, but she does not give in or yield. The Darkling sighs a tired sigh, and presses his lips to the corner of her forehead.

Then the shadows flicker, and he is gone. The heat from his lips still on her neck. The taste of her tears on his tongue.

viii.

The next morning, Alina finds Misha. Bright and earnest Misha, who is a fine king. Who she must leave behind with her hopes. Who she loves, and can't watch die. Who she tells her secret. He grabs her hand tightly with his liver-spotted one, but he understands. Because he did, after all, serve Baghra when he was a young man and still had eyes good enough to read.

The two of them stage the death of *Tsaritsa* Lantsov. It's a peaceful tale, of an old woman going to bed and simply not waking the next day. Alina takes the rest of her time in the Little Palace to set the affairs of the armies in order, to make sure protective laws for the grisha are strongly in place, to leave her things for her children, her grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, to let them know she loves them all very much. She tucks the Lantsov emerald under Ana's mattress.

In the years to come, her actions will be reflected upon as divine action. For who could so tidily leave the world behind but a saint? One who knew the exact moment of her death?

For such mysteries were not for the people of Ravka to understand, but when the news broke that the *Tsaritsa* had passed, all mourned her loss. And, in mass, they attended the funeral rites of *Sankta Alina*, *Tsaritsa* Lantsov. Defeater of the Darkling. Closer of the Fold. Who, with her husband, united the armies of the grisha and the *otkazat'sya*. Who brought peace and prosperity. Who was already history, taught in schools, before she removed herself from the stories.

They give her a holiday, in the middle of summer. The day where the sun shines the longest is called *Sankta Alina's*, and the people of Ravka are given time off to enjoy the outside.

In the chaos of indoctrinating a new saint and mourning the loss of a ruler, no one notices an old servant woman leave the grounds of the Little Palace with only a pack on her back. No one notices as she heads for the borders of Ravka. No one sees age fall off of her with every step, until she is no longer a crone of Os Alta, but a young girl who has decided that it is time to travel.

Fifty years pass. And people forget about the Fold, as the people who lived it have all died. The Lantsov line continues to rule, despite there not being a drop of Lantsov blood in their veins. The armies are one combined, instead of two apart. Misha leaves the world behind to his son, Malyen, who leaves it behind in turn to his son Boris, who is fair and well-mannered. Ana's granddaughter, Tatiana, marries a Shu prince and secures an alliance.

The children of Ravka hear stories about the Darkling and the Sankta, and of how good won against evil. In some versions, the Darkling wanted the Sankta for his bride, but she was stolen away, by either an orphan boy or a dashing Tsar. In others, he steals children that the Sankta frees. And the people begin to forget that these stories were once memories, that the characters were once humans, brave and flawed and strong and weak.

Time heals all things. Even Ravka.

The Sankta continues to travel and takes on different names. She meets many people, studies different languages, tries strange new foods. Sometimes she has lovers, though nothing that can get close to her heart. Nothing that can take away a piece of her, because she has so little left to give.

The Sankta wears her loss like a crown. And she begins to leave Alina behind in order to try and keep living.

During the day she laughs and learns and grows.

During the night she tries to sleep and forget. It works, for a little while. But sometimes, in that space between rest and waking, she can see the shadows moving around her room, and she knows that he's watching. Biding his time. Waiting to give her another name.

ix.

Ninety years after the death of *Tsaritsa* Lantsov, almost two hundred since the end of their first war, a discovery is made in the training barracks of the Bol'shoy Army.

An Etheralki trainer is making his rounds when he sees a new recruit doing something no one has ever done in the history of the Bol'shoy: a young man, with grey eyes and dark hair kept back in a knot at the base of his neck, sits bending shadows around his hands.

Tovarish

Chapter Notes

SO THIS CHAPTER GOT AWAY FROM ME TOO, and now this fic is going to be four parts.

Thank you for all of the notes, kudos, reviews, asks, and comments!! Special thank you to morozovaaleksander aka The Illustrious Dani for talking shop, headcanoning, and reading this over! (And if you love alarkling go read her fics, they are amazing!)

-Ivan and Ana's children (Alina's grandchildren) took the Lantsov surname because Nobility >

xii.

He's heard the expression before, but it's not until he's setting foot in the Little Palace that the Darkling feels the reality of never going home again. It's not the first time he's been banished from Os Alta, but it is the first time he looks to find something familiar. Rulers are replaced, kingdoms fall, but palaces remain unchanged save for the portraits hanging in the halls. And the Little Palace is no different—its fine carpets are the same, the chandeliers, and the gardens, too.

There is still a small hut on the grounds, down by the shoreline.

Which is where the Darkling decides to reside, once he is formally admitted into the elite rankings of the Bol'shoy (a ridiculous name, no doubt given by Lantsov). It's nothing like his former rooms at the Little Palace, but this version of himself must remain humble and unambitious if he is to succeed later, even if it feels like a skin that doesn't fit.

Baghra's old hut is somehow in serviceable condition. When he asks a servant if it's been occupied, the boy only shrugs and makes a comment of how they've always maintained it, even though it's always been empty.

The Darkling represses his anger at the statement. And patiently reminds himself that to an *otkazat'sya*, *always* is a subjective term.

He finds out (later and through a series of careful questions) that it was a former *Tsaritsa* who sanctioned the hut as a historical marker, as something to be preserved.

The Darkling doesn't know if Alina wanted to commit a kindness or a curse.

xiii.

The man sitting across from him meets his eyes with only a small frown on his face. And it's obvious to the Darkling that the head of the Bol'shoy is making an attempt of intimidation. Even

knowing that it will cause the man to give him some sort of internal demerit for speaking out of turn, the Darkling bows his head in order to hide his amused smile.

“You wished to speak with me.”

“You wished to speak with me, Commander Lantsov,” he corrects gruffly, pouring himself a glass of water from the carafe that sits between them. Maksim Lantsov is a bull of a man, all heavy muscle with the greying, short-clipped hair of military discipline. The Darkling can’t stop himself from trying to find hints of her in his features, trying to see if the grey was once brown, if his cheeks would dimple if he smiled. “I figured it was time we introduced ourselves to one another.” The Lantsov looks at him skeptically over the edge of his glass as he takes a sip. “You’ve made an impression with our instructors.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

Maksim snorts, shaking his head. “Can I be frank with you?”

As if he expected one of hers to be anything else. “Of course.”

“You have people spooked.” The Lantsov gestures for the Darkling to pour himself a glass. He does, more out of politeness than thirst. “I’m sure you know the stories.”

It’s amusing, to say the least. “I did not think the Bol’shoy were prone to superstition.”

“We aren’t. Ravka is.”

“And the Empress?”

The Lantsov sends him a confused look. “More concerned about the Fjerdan occupation of West Ravkan land than if there’s a-“

“Summoner.”

“-*summoner* showing up in the recruitment tents.” Lantsov leans back in his seat, folding his hands over the hard mass of his stomach. He’s a retired fighter, it’s clear with every inch of his body. And he’s also kind, because the Darkling sees him trying to grin in sympathy even when he’s so obviously uncomfortable. It’s an expected advantage. “Look, I don’t care if you can summon flying monkeys, but I need you to know that your presence here is a lot more complicated than the average soldier’s.”

The Darkling trails his long fingers over the rim of the glass. “Is this where you ask me to behave, Commander Lantsov?”

“No,” he says curtly, “This is where I let you know I’m watching.”

The Darkling moves so easily behind his false life. It’s something that’s been rehearsed so many times over the centuries that it becomes reality, if only for a moment. He is not the Darkling, the Black Heretic. He is a new recruit for that moment, forcing his eyes wide and a troubled frown onto his lips. He is a shepherd hiding among the flock so he can better understand how to lead them. “I don’t know why I am able to do what I do. But I know I do not intend to cause harm.”

The Lantsov--*Maksim*, he reminds himself--stares at him critically, and the Darkling allows it because there is no fault to be found.

Finally, the edge that envelops Maksim lessens, though it does not entirely disappear. He lifts his

glass and says the toast that was popularized about two hundred years ago. “Then, *dlya Ravka*.”

The Darkling nods, and lifts his glass as well. “For Ravka.”

Only one of Maksim’s cheeks dimple when he smiles.

He falls back into an army life like rehearsing the steps of a waltz. In the morning, he takes breakfast. And he is seated between two *otkazat’sya* soldiers, Piotr and Erik (the name nags at the back of his mind, something forgotten though he can’t remember why it seems important), who speak loudly but say very little. They are young (*all* of them are young), and see the occupation as something exciting.

“They say the Fjerdans took Khazdan-gorod three days ago-”

“Commander Lantsov is assembling a group of elite-“

“I *know*, I do have ears you realize. Fifty grisha and fifty soldiers-“

It’s difficult, to see how integrated the armies have become in his absence. To know that even the most powerful of the grisha is given the same status as something as common and unremarkable as a sniper. To see the death of his vision for Ravka, because it has been replaced with her own.

The grisha do not even have *kefta*. Instead they only wear armbands of blue, red, and purple over the standard navy coats of the military. His armband is blue, and undistinguishable from the others. Even the *otkazat’sya* have armbands of their own as well, green for scouts, brown for support, white for leadership, and others he has not had the inclination to decode.

And the members of the Bol’shoy do not address each other by rank or title. Instead they just use the uniform greeting of *Tovarish*.

It’s simple.

And, as he will eventually show them, it is *weak*.

The problem with equal standing is that it suffocates talent. Ravka cannot be strong when its defense has been reformed into a herd.

It will take time, to fix this problem that she has created. But that has never been an obstacle for him.

He excels in his lessons, but not enough to raise suspicion.

He mentions the strength of the grisha, but not enough to create dissention.

He earns friendships within the Bol’shoy, but not ones that are strong enough to hold trust or grief.

And he serves under his Commander, but not faithfully.

The Darkling falls back into army life like rehearsing the steps of a waltz. But it is a delicate dance. One where a single misstep will ruin the whole of the performance.

Within five years, he is an assistant commander to Lantsov, who respects him even if he does not trust him. And he is in charge of directing the *Etherealki* corps.

Ravka has not seen war yet, but two more villages become occupied. The Darkling merely waits. Villages, after all, are expendable in the scheme of things.

Sometimes there is talk, about the old stories. About *skazki*, where someone called the Black Heretic ripped apart Ravka with darkness. And another one, where the Darkling tried to kidnap a *Sankta*, who defeated him and later married the great *Tsar* Nikolai Lantsov, who is nicknamed by history as The Fox King. About power and monsters. And there is no small amount of fear with the tales.

...But then the soldiers remember that he is one of their *Tovarish*. That there hasn't been a Fold for as long as anyone living can remember. That this is the same man who spoons extra brown sugar into his porridge during breakfast.

Someone who loves brown sugar in his porridge cannot be a monster. One of their *Tovarish* cannot hunger for power to the extent that he would split Ravka apart. It simply does not make sense. And if he chooses to live in an old, abandoned hut by the shoreline instead of in the Little Palace, well. All men had their oddities.

So the stories went from talks to whispers, and then whispers to silence.

Throughout his time at the Little Palace, the Darkling does not use their connection to call to her, because he knows she will come to him in time. An army is many things, but it is never quiet.

There are rumors that a Fjerdan march on another Ravkan village was mysteriously stopped. No one knows the details, but all witnesses agree on one thing: they had seen bright, flashes of light before the Fjerdans retreated. Most confuse it for lightning. But the Darkling knows better, and he smiles at nothing in the dark.

He has been a *Tovarish* for seven years, and an assistant commander for two, when he sees her again.

xiv.

When the Darkling walks into Baghra's home (it's not *his*, he would never settle for this) one evening, he is wiping his hands on a cloth and distracted with thoughts of training exercises. It is not until he sits down at the old table, pouring himself a glass of kvass, that he realizes he is not alone.

She is sitting in front of his mother's old fire pit, staring into the flames and not even sparing him a glance. He hopes this place is as painful for her as it is for him. Alina's hair is white and beautiful, unbound and resting on her shoulders as she cradles her chin in her hand. And he knows she has found him through the bond and not in person. White hair is distinctive, impossible to hide

throughout the centuries.

She tilts her head, pulling the shawl around her shoulders tighter. It looks of Fjerdan make.

...It is always something of a fascination for him, the unease he experiences with her nearby. It is only in her presence that he realizes his need for her when she is absent. It's a wound reopened, every time.

"You took longer than expected," he says, moving towards her but not yet sitting beside her.

Alina shakes her head, not averting her gaze from the hearth. "I didn't know you returned to Ravka until last year."

He smiles, leaning against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. "Isolation already?"

Her shoulders sag a little, and she sighs. "Not as isolated as I desired."

The Darkling is silent, taking a moment to simply revisit his memories of her profile. She is as unchanged as ever, which pleases him. It means she is using her power, not sealing it away like he thought she would after the death of her Tsar. She hasn't given up, and it makes him almost happy in his choice of an equal.

His eyes shift slowly towards the fire as well. "Are you coming to stop me, Alina?"

"Do you need to be stopped?"

The Darkling frowns, mulling the question over in his mind. It's not what he's expecting from her. And he doesn't have an answer, because they share power, they share eternity, and will eventually share each other. But what they don't share is a dream.

"Ravka's army is weak," he says instead of an answer.

He can sense her displeasure at the statement, but he ignores it for now. Giving her a taste of her own medicine, perhaps. "Bol'shoy," is the only explanation he offers.

The Darkling can almost hear the smile on her lips, and it makes something twist poisonously under his ribs. "Nikolai named it."

"I assumed as much."

The fire curls up and over the logs he brought in from outside. The smell of birch bark filters throughout the small expanse of the hut. It's almost soothing.

She must find it soothing, too. Because after a few moments of companionable silence, he decides he is tired (of so many things, of so many more things to come) and sits behind her. His hands wrap around her stomach and he frames his legs outside of her own. Alina is only tense for a moment, before uncoiling and leaning against him. She draws him in like gravity, and the more he resists the more he craves the feel of her skin against his. He lets his chin rest on top of her head, before he allows himself the indulgence of pressing a kiss against the place between her shoulder and neck. She's warm. Always so warm. His grip tightens, as if that will keep her there. As if he could hold the sun.

Alina still hasn't looked at him.

"Where are you," he whispers into her ear.

“Traveling.”

“For how long?”

“Until I can’t anymore.”

He shifts one hand from her stomach to her thigh, moving his fingers slowly up and down the expanse of it. “Are you waiting for me to make that decision for you?”

“I’m waiting for you to take it away.”

The Darkling presses another kiss to her neck, letting this one linger. His tongue ghosts out between his lips, tracing that invisible line of her pulse with slow, deliberate intention. Her inhale sharpens, and he takes that as encouragement, moving his mouth up the column of her neck, biting gently down on the lobe of her ear as he presses his fingers tightly into her leg. He becomes acutely aware of the expanse of her back against his chest, her hand resting over his knee. The slight shifting of her body. He is not aware that his own breath is starting to come in soft pants, too.

“Stay tonight.” He hears the begging in his voice, but it doesn’t matter.

Alina’s hand moves from his knee to grab his wrist, but he doesn’t release his grip. “It’s not real.”

“It doesn’t need to be.”

She’s quiet, and he presses another kiss, this time below her jaw. The hand on her stomach trails up, resting in between her breasts, over her heart. “Alina...”

The sound of her name makes her go rigid against him. And he smiles, going to kiss her neck again. The smile fades against her skin as her breathing levels. As her fingers grip his wrist tighter.

“Don’t make me come back, Aleksander.”

He closes his eyes at the sound of his name.

When he opens them, his hands are empty. And he says her name again, though this time like a curse.

The Darkling stays awake. Alone. Watching the fire burn down to nothing.

He will make her return.

xvi.

Six days after she leaves him, the Darkling is called for an audience with the *Tsaritsa*. Oksana Lantsov is different than her distant cousin. Unlike Maksim, her footfalls are elegant and her posture regal. She is every inch a Queen. Though she is draped in fine silks and gems, her eyes are as hard as steel.

He meets her in the gardens.

She does not offer her hand, and it is with unspoken civility that he falls into step slightly behind her as she walks.

The *Tsaritsa* is leaning down to smell a rose when she finally acknowledges his presence. “I understand that you have some talent.”

The Darkling nods. He knows with this type of leader it does not pay to express empty humility. “I have studied and trained hard since being accepted into the Bol’shoy.”

“You have impressed Maksim. He is not easily impressed.”

He remains silent. The *Tsaritsa* is old, by the standards of *otkazat’sya*. Eighties, perhaps, though it is hard to be certain. He has stopped keeping track of Alina’s children after the death of Ana, decades ago.

“He is speaking of retiring from the frontlines, and joining the Council,” she continues, as if she is discussing the weather. Her eyes drift to him and her look is speculative. No doubt searching for any indication of ambition or greed. He gives her none. It’s not even an act, because he does not need to be excited by events that he knows will happen inevitably.

His words are tactful. Diplomatic. “A matter of concern, with the hostility from Fjerda.”

She raises an eyebrow, and her lips purse. “If I were to ask you your honest opinion of Fjerdan matters, would you give it?”

“I do not make a habit of lying to *Tsaritsas*.”

Oksana Lantsov straightens and continues walking, her hands folded primly behind her. “A wise statement, if true, and a daring one, if false.” She hums, turning her face to the sun, and breathing deep. “Maksim believes diplomacy would be best. He has advised me to marry my granddaughter to one of their princes.”

The Darkling restrains his sigh. Maksim is one of *hers*, through and through. “...Such tactics worked with the Shu.”

“We also had capable ambassadors who lived with the Shu for years prior to the marriage, or so my war historians have lead me to believe.”

“You sound skeptical.”

Oksana frowns, looking at him over her shoulder. “I am a monarch who has ruled over a peaceful Ravka. I find myself at a loss when I hear from my scouts that there are villages burning while my nobles dine on quail and caviar. I find myself angry.”

He keeps his face easy, complacent. “You have spoken with your Council?”

The *Tsaritsa*’s frown deepens, and she turns her attention back to the gardens. “I do not trust you. I do not trust a man who arrives from the thin air with no ties, no family name, and makes himself a commander. I do not rest easy with the idea that you can do what only enemies of Ravka have been able to do in the past.”

The Darkling remains silent, letting her continue. She has clearly already made a decision. She only needs to reconcile it with herself.

Oksana’s fine fingers dance over the petals of a nearby flower. “They say that my family has the

blood of a saint in them. That we were given Ravka because we could keep it safe from the dark." She sneers, and crushes a petal in between her fingers. "But what if the only way to keep Ravka safe is to break that covenant? What if I am burdened with the decision to give power to the only one who has the ability to keep it safe, no matter how uneasy it makes me?"

The Darkling bows his head. "I am not what you think, *Tsaritsa*. Have I not defended Ravka? Have I not trained alongside my *Tovarish*?"

Oksana meets his gaze directly. Her eyes are blue, like the winter sea. "Again, I do not trust you. I do not have faith in you. And I do not want to place the fates of my children in your hands. But I have a Commander who does not want war, and villagers suffering under the hands of Fjerdans. And I do not know battle. No one of Ravka has known war in generations. But I see scars in your eyes, summoner. And if the children of Ravka sleep soundly, then I can make a deal with a demon before I surrender them to Fjerda."

"...You appear to have made up your mind, *Tsaritsa*."

Oksana's jaw clenches. "Take control of the Bol'shoy, summoner. Unleash whatever hell you can manage. But keep Ravka intact."

"Of course."

The Darkling bows, and is dismissed with a wave of her hand. The *Tsaritsa* is unable to look at him, and the ramification of her decision, for even another moment.

The Darkling takes over Ravka's armies, and so begins their second war.

xvii.

He is able to select his own war party when he moves closer to the Fjerdan border. And if someone notices that there is a ratio of two grisha to every *otkazat'sya*, no one makes mention of it. The members of the Bol'shoy take to his leadership easily. He has learned a thing or two about controlling armies over the centuries.

The campaign has been quiet so far, with only a few scouting parties of Fjerdans falling quickly to his forces. Still, the winter months are edging in, and the cold makes any soldier weary. So as they move closer to the villages that are occupied, the Darkling finds a shelter for them to rest in for a night, one with walls instead of the canvas of tents.

The abandoned mansion is rotting. There is a hollow pool, empty of water, and orchard trees that have lost all of their leaves. But it seems solid enough to hold the winter at bay. And so he orders his company to make camp.

For himself, he rests in the old conservatory attached. It has large, glass windows, and appears to have once been used as a study. There is a desk in the corner, and he makes use of it. Maps from the cartographers are spread in front of him, as well as reports from his scouts. The night stretches on, and he updates his information of the occupations as accurately as he can, until his eyes start to strain and his head pounds with a headache.

When he leans back in his seat, rubbing the bridge of his nose to stifle fatigue, a journal falls to the ground. He picks it up without much thought—it's covered in dust, and the binding is falling apart,

causing loose leafs of pages to fall out of it. As a way to delay the tedious task of planning a war, the Darkling slowly picks them up.

One piece of paper, in particular, makes him pause.

At first he only sees the corner, and the name *Oretsev*. The surname causes a surge of anger to flare in his chest, though he isn't sure why. But it nags at him, and as such, he pulls out the entire sheet. There are only two lines written with ink.

Malyen Oretsev.

And, underneath it:

Alina Starkov.

His thoughts travel back to the last time he was at the Little Palace. To letters that passed briefly through his hands and then just as quickly into the fire. Of a tracker. Of the unspoken devotion that passed in the writing. Of the hasty, untidy scrawl that penned *Yours*, at the end of every missive.

His fingers dig crescents into the paper. And he wonders when the universe decided to make a joke of him.

The paper is put back into the journal, which is stored at the bottom of one of the Darkling's traveling chests.

Two weeks later, they slaughter the Fjerdan forces. The occupied villages are cleansed of their enemy soldiers with fire, wind, and tide. With bullets and bombs.

But nothing makes as much of an impression as the Ravkan Commander, who splits the ground in two. Who controls the night itself, wrapping it around the Fjerdan soldiers and swallowing them whole. Who secures a Ravkan victory with minimal casualties. Not a single grisha falls in the battle, and most of the common soldiers survive as well.

For the Fjerdans, it's carnage.

For Ravka, it's strength.

The whispers start again, but instead of terror-filled *skazki*, these tales are spoken with awe and no small amount of worship. No one has seen such power before, and it is a power that belongs solely to Ravka.

When his company returns victorious, *Tsaritsa* Oksana Lantsov and her Council take only two days to officially declare war.

Alina comes to him three days after that.

The Darkling is nursing a glass of kvass and reading a stack of Morozova journals (they were discovered by him a few days ago, in an auxiliary library of all places) when she appears to him again. Near the Morozova works is the journal he found in the conservatory. He has pointedly not looked at it since its discovery.

She's furious. He doesn't care.

"You've taken control of the Bol'shoy," Alina hisses between clenched teeth.

He licks his thumb, turning a page in the current Morozova journal he is rereading. "You've kept me waiting."

She starts to pace, and it's such a *young* expression of frustration that he almost laughs. And he would laugh, if he did not have that journal on his desk. If he had her here with him in body, and not only in mind. "They are saying Ravka is declaring war on Fjerda, is it true?"

He turns another page.

"Is it true."

"It is what Ravka's *Tsaritsa* desires it to be."

"Liar!"

The Darkling finally looks up from the journal. And she is glaring poison, eyes burning through his body. Her hands are curled into fists at her side, and he knows if she could use the Cut here, she would. The thought almost excites him. Because at least, on this visit, she is actually looking at him.

He gives a soft snort, rubbing his temple. "You told me not to make you come back to Ravka. Did you not think I would see that as a challenge?"

Horror falls over her face, and he sighs. So much has changed with her. So much has stayed the same. "Do not be so small-minded, Alina. We both know Fjerda brought war upon itself."

"You slaughtered the soldiers." Her eyes flash. "I saw the ground broken by the Cut."

The Darkling smiles at her slip. "So you are near the Ravkan border."

She tenses. Alina has always worn her heart on her sleeve, and it's clear that even after a lifetime of court, and another spent among strangers, she has not learned how to form a proper mask. But, to her credit, she doesn't try to deny it. Instead she swallows and finally sees what is on his table. "Are those Morozova's."

"They are. Thank you for keeping them for me."

"I didn't keep them for you."

"Then why have them at all?" He tilts his head. "Unless you want his research for yourself?"

"Maybe I should have burned them," Alina spits.

He frowns. She is still rash, and she is still more than capable of burrowing under his skin. The Darkling stands, fingers moving over the journals until they rest on one. And the idea wedges into his mind. A part of him wants to hurt her. Hurt her for leaving him alone. For weakening Ravka under a banner of idealism. For making him exposed and distracted. For not heeding his call for

her, or taking his second name even after all this time.

“When we were marching on the border,” he begins, taking that cursed, rotting journal in his hands. She must not recognize it, because she lets him stand and take a step closer to his mother’s hearth. “I came across an old conservatory.”

Alina’s rage simmers down into a bemused frown. “And you decided to water the plants?”

He gives a bitter grin, moving until he is directly in front of the flames. His fingers trail over the spine of the journal before he opens it. “No. I found this, on a desk. It’s old. Probably last read at least two hundred years ago.”

And he waits for her to recognize it. Waits until he sees the color bleed from her face. For her eyes to water. Only then does he turn to that page and read out loud: “Malyen Oretsev.”

The syllables are foreign and strange on his tongue. It’s possible this is the first time he’s actually spoken the name.

It will also be the last time.

Anger is gone from her voice, and there is only the thick, uncertain sound of tears when she *begs*, “Aleksander...”

He meets her stare.

And throws the journal into the hearth.

“No-!” She cries in a strangled tone, shoving past him in order to kneel in front of the fire. He knows if she were *here*, if she were corporeal, her hands would be in it, grabbing desperately for the old journal. But she is not here, and instead her fingers move through the flames like a ghost’s. The paper curls black around the corners.

He kneels next to her. He sees the tears roll down her cheeks. Even now, she makes him just as weak as she has made Ravka.

“Let this remind you,” the Darkling pulls her to him, and though she struggles in his grasp, his arms are like chains, “I may not know where you are. But you know *exactly* where I am, and exactly what I am willing to do. And I grow tired of this game.” He grabs her chin with his hand, forcing her to look at him and not at the burning scraps of paper. His voice is as soft as a prayer, as comforting as a mother trying to sing her children to sleep. His grip is iron. “Return to the Little Palace, Alina. Or you will not like what you force me to do.”

She shoves away from him, and snarls like a wounded animal. “*Don’t touch me!*”

And he throws his head back in a bitter, short laugh. “You are not a girl anymore, *Sol-nyshka moyo*. Who do you have left to turn to? Who do you have left that knows your name but me?”

Alina’s eyes squeeze close, as though in physical pain, and then she is gone.

He watches the fire burn what is left of her tracker with a vicious smile on his face. A hand goes to the scar over his chest.

Now they are even.

xix.

He feels her grief through their bond. But he does not go to her like he did the last time, with her Tsar. The Darkling is tired of watching her love other, lesser men. Dead men.

As the days pass into weeks, into months, the grief turns into anger, then the anger into something cold and hard. He knows that feeling all too well.

It's loneliness.

They win another victory against Fjerda. This time, the members of the Bol'shoy notice that the Darkling has two grisha for every soldier. And they also notice that the casualties are smaller than Maksim projected them to be in the War Council.

After their third overwhelming victory, the *Tsaritsa* offers him a set of private rooms in the Little Palace. When he politely refuses, she looks at him with something that might be approval and gives him a carriage and a team of horses instead.

They continue fighting. They continue winning. Ravka even gains Fjerdan land in the northeast.

And the people praise him. He is no longer the monster that hides under the bed, but the powerful Commander who keeps their children safe at night. People begin to praise the grisha, too.

Maksim, he notices, has begun to keep his distance. And he no longer invites the Darkling to sit in on games of poker, or to share a glass of kvass after drills.

The loss isn't felt too heavily. For Oksana has begun inviting him to tea.

Ravka has been at war for a year. They have lost soldiers. But production rises. The economy grows. And what is a handful of *otkazat'sya* lives when most of Ravka goes to bed with full stomachs and the Fjerdans are running with their tails between their legs?

Another year, four new Ravkan territories, and finally she returns.

xx.

She is on the edges of his encampment the next time he sees her, wearing her hair under a hat and huddled in a heavy coat. It reminds him of the first time she visited him through their bond, when she was in the Little Palace and moving like a ghost through the crowd. He almost doesn't see her, and the thought makes him frown. He would not put spying beyond her.

They are stationed on the outskirts of the border between what they are already calling New Ravka and the rest of Fjerda. And Alina is staring at the military camp, taking in everything that has no doubt changed since her own time as an *otkazat'sya*. The elevated weaponry. Her simple, pathetic

armbands. No doubt she finds it reassuring instead of damning that the soldiers and grisha are still so integrated.

He wonders if he should wait for her to approach him. He doubts this time will be a pleasant reunion, even though he has done her a favor.

The Darkling is still wrestling with indecision when one of his scouts brings him intelligence to evaluate.

When he looks up, she's gone.

She appears again during mess, where he, as a *Tovarish*, is required to sit with the common soldiers for dinner. She's sitting at the end of a bench, hair still in a hat, heavy coat still on, and staring at him with a small frown on her lips.

She stays throughout the whole meal, but says nothing to him.

He stares back, and wonders at what sort of game she's playing, before one of his strategists needs his input in the War Tent.

She is seen in flashes. One moment, she's standing outside the barracks.

Another day, he sees her hovering behind a group of *Etherealki*.

Near the Medical Tent.

Beside the horses.

Small glimpses of her is all he can decipher: the tail of her jacket, the top of her hat.

It goes on for three more months.

When he calls to her through their tether, she does not answer. When he sees her, she is always silent.

He does not appreciate being toyed with.

The Darkling is returning from a small skirmish with New Ravkan (Fjerdan) rebels, when he sees her again. Alina is turned away from him, still burrowed deep within her coat. Her hair still pinned neatly under a hat. Not far away from her, a blond *otkazat'sya* is standing, muttering something to himself as he looks at the ground.

And enough is enough. He makes his excuses to his grisha lieutenants—*Tovarish*—and makes his way to her turned back. Her name is on the tip of his tongue when she speaks first.

"I'm sorry."

He stops in his step, not sure what to make of the statement. The words are foreign, something that has never been said directly to him. She's never admitted that what she does is an attack against him, never owned her committed betrayals.

"You're sure?" The voice that responds is not his, and the Darkling's head snaps up to see that the blond otkazat'sya is no longer looking at his feet, but to his side.

Where she is standing.

The Darkling doesn't move. Doesn't breathe.

Alina nods her head. "I'm sure, *Tovarish* Krasavet."

The otkazat'sya is handsome, the Darkling supposes. He has square features, and when he smiles at *her*, at *Alina*, he feels something cold settle in his stomach. "I've told you to call me Sasha, Marya."

She gives a short laugh like a sigh. "And I have told you to call me *Tovarish* Sajin."

The idiotic *boy* leans forward, and he's grinning at her like he knows the type of game she plays. "Perhaps I--"

And then, finally, he sees the Darkling standing over her shoulder. The otkazat'sya's entire body tenses in his shadow. The Darkling says nothing, just waits for the idiot to dismiss himself.

The otkazat'sya swallows. "*Tovarish* Starkov, how can I--?"

Later, when he has had time to reflect upon it, he will take pleasure at how Alina freezes in place at the sound of his new, false name. But as it stands, his attention is solely focused on deciphering what it means that some soldier is aware of her existence in camp when he is not.

"I believe you have duties elsewhere, *Tovarish*," he says carefully.

He gives a shaky nod. "Of course, *Tovarish* Starkov," and he has the audacity to divert his attention from him before he leaves. To smile at her again. "Mar- *Tovarish* Sajin."

"Sasha," she replies, refusing to look behind her even though she must know his voice as intimately as she knows her own.

He grabs her arm, and leans his head beside her ear. The Darkling sees that the hair underneath her hat has been dyed brown. That beneath her jacket is the collar of a *Tovarish* uniform.

Anger blazes through him, but he manages to keep his voice controlled. Level.

His fingers curl tighter around her bicep. "A word."

She still does not look at him, her back straight as a soldier's at attention. "Whatever you say, *Tovarish*."

When he drags her behind him into his personal tent, the guards posted outside of it quickly find themselves needed elsewhere. *Tovarish* Starkov is known for his poise above most things, and the cold rage he is practically emitting is enough to clear the area. A few soldiers even look at her with pity, as if she did not bring this upon herself.

The Darkling lets go of her arm as soon as they enter, glaring as he faces her.

She looks sick. Her face is pale, and the dark circles under her eyes are almost purple in hue. But her jaw is clenched in defiance. And she stares at him without fear.

“Are you always so friendly with your soldiers?”

His fingers curl into his palms, and he can hear the knuckles crack. “You collect *otkazat'sya* like stray cats.”

Alina snorts. “Perhaps if you paid attention to them more, you’d-“

“I’d what, Alina. Notice you’ve been pretending to be one?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I am not the only one pretending, *Tovarish Starkov*.”

His lip curls. “I found myself in need for something common and unambitious.”

Alina takes a step back, and he matches it forward. She scowls at his advance, but shakes her head. “You need to stop this invasion.”

It’s almost enough to make him laugh, the idea that she thinks she knows what he *needs*. But he’s not in the mood to inform her now, so his question is direct as he towers over her. “How long have you been in camp?”

“Long enough.”

“*Answer me, Alina.*”

“Nine months. Three in the training, six stationed here.”

The Darkling sneers. “And you must think you’re clever. Hiding in plain sight.”

She frowns. “Not hiding, Aleksander. Observing.”

He has to close his eyes. He has to admit to himself that he has given her another weapon against him. And he has to wonder why he continues to subject himself to her punishments. “Observing what.”

“How you’re trying to destroy what Nikolai and I built.”

“What you and your king built,” he mutters, “is not going to be enough.”

“For Ravka, or for you?”

“Not everyone lives like a mouse.”

“It’s better than living like an avalanche.”

He takes another step forward. She tenses, but does not back away. “Why are you here?”

Alina meets his gaze, and he hates looking at her like this. Hates seeing how she intentionally smothers herself in order to wear the coat of something that doesn’t fit.

Her words are cold. “Would you believe that I’ve missed you?”

He wants to. “...No.”

Her fingers trail along his wrist, and the contact is so unexpected that he nearly flinches. They are soft, light, almost dancing against his skin. "Once, you said I was your balance. Did you mean it?"

The Darkling is still furious with her. For her deception. For her sentimentality. For her cursed idealism, which traveled through the blood of her progeny like a virus. But he also desires. And sometimes that is enough to outweigh the anger. "Yes."

"Then that's why I'm here," she brings her hand up to cup his cheek, and her fingers dance over the scars on his face like they danced on his wrist. "I'm not letting you take Ravka back. And I'm not giving you an opportunity for another Fold."

He holds her wrist, and doesn't break eye contact with her as he slowly presses his lips against her palm. "Is this your attempt to make me a better man?"

She almost looks near tears, for a moment. A gentleness that he knows is not for him crosses her face, and he does not doubt that she is thinking of that accursed tracker again. Or the foolish king. Of how he burned away a part of her and would not apologize for it, just like he knows she will not forgive him.

"No, Aleksander," she whispers. "This is my attempt to keep you from destroying the better men."

And Alina leaves him, then. Though this time with footfalls and the closing of the front flap of his tent, instead of with a cut or fade.

It's not a concession. But it's progress, and once again their game has changed.

Tovarish Sasha Krasavet is transferred back to Os Alta. And *Tovarish* Starkov suddenly has developed an interest in the daily affairs of the non-grisha soldiers. One soldier, in particular.

xxi.

The next six months see to the continued campaign against Fjerda.

During the day, he has his role as commander. And she keeps to the soldiers. And they do not speak to each other, though he finds himself walking past the cartography tent more than he did before.

At night, he invites her to his War Tent, where they sit across from each other. She keeps her attention focused on the intelligence documents, and occasionally giving directives. He follows half of them (the ones that are not too inconvenient to his plans).

And he keeps his attention focused on her.

They still do not speak much to each other, but neither moves until the light from the sun peaks in under the canvas.

The *otkazat'sya* and grisha casualties grow more proportionate in the battles against New Ravkan rebels.

The fresher food in the mess is served to the grisha. The *otkazat'sya* receive new boots.

Their second war becomes a thing of secrets, of subtle power plays in the dark.

He lets her feel what it is to have control. At night he lets her draw the lines of where they can march, where they must defend. He lets her have a glimpse of power, in hopes that she develops a taste for it.

They do not take as much land. They do not have as much production.

They do not lose as many soldiers. They do not have as many funerals.

He invites her to his other tent, after three more months pass.

“Not this night, either.” Is her only reply.

When he returns to his personal tent, he stares into the glass of kvass and thinks about chess. How sometimes small surrenders are necessary in order to win. How he is very tired of being the only occupant in his bed.

He misses the way she looks at him in contemplation when he permits her directives. Doesn't see the troubled, thoughtful frown when he agrees to temporarily focus on the defense of Ravka rather than the destruction of Fjerda.

Two more months pass. And time heals all things, even an uneasy coexistence. But it takes his death to forget the scars.

xxii.

It's been almost another year of their standstill, of fighting the bond between them, when Fjerda forces both of their hands.

It begins with a simple perimeter check of a New Ravkan settlement, one he decides to lead with a handful of grisha and a dozen soldiers. He is surprised when he asks her to accompany him. Even more surprised when she accepts.

Not that he sees her once throughout the excursion. Alina keeps to the end of the march, out of his sights but not out of his mind as he conducts surveillance of the village. Fitting for a novice cartographer, but unsatisfying for the only one who is like him.

It is standard, boring. And they are just about to leave the village when the buildings start to burst into flame. Horns sound, and the Darkling does not even have to realize it is an ambush—that he

has been betrayed once again by someone in his encampment, because his position has been given into enemy hands. And enemy hands are currently swarming the village, flooding the streets and he has a moment to be impressed at the Fjerdans' resilience.

As he uses the Cut (because he can't raise his soldiers, his *true* soldiers yet. Not as *Tovarish* Starkov) to split hundreds of insurgents in half, his eyes search the crowd for her. She would be stubborn enough to die as a soldier than use her power to return to life as a Sankta, after all.

His distraction is a weakness, and it allows the Fjerdan sniper, hiding in a church tower, an opening.

One bullet pierces his shoulder, and he falls to a knee at the force of it. The Darkling gives out a howl of rage as he aims the Cut-

And is shot again, this time in his thigh.

He staggers and casts his summons out blindly, ignoring the throb of pain. Another bullet tears through his arm, and he falls.

The last thing he hears is his name, his true name, cried out. The last thing he sees is the beautiful, buttery light of the sun as it splits the entire church tower in half.

xxiii.

Officially, *Tovarish* Starkov, Commander of the Bol'shoy, is killed in active duty that day. His death prompts the Tsaritsa and the Council to take a less aggressive stance on the war, until eventually it becomes conditions of surrender headed by former Commander Maksim Lantsov.

Years later, far away in the heart of Ravka, the ambush of the Fjerdan rebels and sympathizers against the commander of the Bol'shoy create a different story. One where the Commander sacrificed his life for his country. Where a Sankta was so moved by his bravery, that she stopped the war to rescue his corpse. To take it somewhere safe where it would be revered.

Stories are not always based in truths.

Stories about them, even less so.

For the Commander does not die, the Sankta has tried to kill him once before, and she has no strong desire to see him further revered.

xxiv.

When he wakes, he doesn't know where he is, his breathing is labored, and his head hurts in a way it hasn't in centuries. His hand is searching for something, pawing blindly at the simple mattress underneath him.

Finally, he feels warm (she is always warm), small hands grab onto it. And he exhales peacefully before he returns to the dark.

When he opens his eyes again, he sees her sitting in a chair beside him. He doesn't know where they are, but it looks like a cabin. She is curled up, almost asleep if not for the wariness in her gaze. Her hand is still in his.

"You saved me," he whispers in disbelief.

She closes her eyes, and doesn't respond. The Darkling breathes past the pain in his chest. He is wearing more scars for her now.

"Why then," he finally rasps, "Are you still here?"

Alina frowns, the question clearly making her uncomfortable. She trails her thumb over his fingers. "I don't know."

The Darkling takes in a labored breath. Feels the scar across her palm.

She bites her lower lip. The next words are whispered, as if they were to herself.

"But I can't leave."

xxv.

Their second war is ended with an assassination and a rescue.

It is forty years until their next one.

The White Martyr

Chapter Notes

Notes: Gonna be five parts now. gdi. I also went back and added titles to the chapters (Prologue: The First War, Tsaritsa, and Tovarish).

Thank you so much to Dani (morozovaaleksander), and Hannah (ignitesthestars) who both chatted The Dorkling with me and helped me out of writer's block quite a few times in this endeavor! Dani also gets credit for the "I hope she screams" exchange <3

Warnings:

Here's where I earn that rating, folks. Explicit (!!!), smutty material ahead. If you want to skip it (or skip to it??), the smut is in section xl.

There is also Dark!Alina. Doing not so nice things Alinakin Skywalker style. And Dark!...Darkling. Also doing not so nice things. Violence + darker themes mentioned.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

xxvi.

He dreams.

He's in a river, waist deep and feeling the cold leech the warmth from his skin. His feet sink with every step, mud making his movements slow, like there are hands grabbing onto his ankles. The water rises until it laps at his chin.

He sees a girl on the shore. She looks back at him, but he cannot tell who she is from so far a distance. She does not move closer.

He opens his eyes.

He is alone, but by his bedside there is a book, opened face down, and a mug of tea that is still steaming.

He's standing in the snow. And it is still and dark.

The only sound is the slow exhale of breath, steaming from the nostrils of the stag. Its inky black eyes meet his own.

He reaches for it, and the stag bows his head, antlers scraping the ground, making divots in the snow. Crimson is the only color in the field, as those divots fill with blood.

The tea is gone, the book is in the exact same place.

The girl's feet are bare as she walks across the river, though her footfalls make harsh, cracking noises. There is a rock in her hand.

He feels the sun on his face. His vision is a field of harsh pinks, the color of burned skin and closed eyelids.

A woman sits beside his bed, her fingers threading through his hair with tender movements. Her gaze is dark, almost black in the lamplight. She is humming a lullaby as her fingers grow colder and colder.

"Solnechnyy krug, nebo vokrug. Eto risunok mal'chishki. Narisoval on na listke. I podpisal v uguolke."

There is the warm, sticky sensation of blood on his pillow.

"Pust' vseгда budet solntse. Pust' vseгда budet nebo..."

The blacks of her irises grow, expanding until they consume her entire face. He stares into the bottomless pits that were once eyes, and there exists a silent question between them that he cannot remember asking.

"Pust' vseгда budet mama...My boy," she whispers, pressing a paper-dry kiss to the corner of his forehead. Her lips come away with red stain. *"My foolish, foolish boy."*

He reaches for her hand, but it falls away from him, and he feels a wind rush through the spaces where her fingers used to be.

Her voice is dry as bones as she sings the last line:

"Pust' vseгда budu ya."

May there always be me.

There is a cool cloth pressed on his shoulder, where he knows he has been shot.

The girl with the rock in her hand kneels down beside him. The soles of his feet begin to slip against the bed of wet stones that are no longer mud.

Her eyes are blue, then light brown.

"How far do you sink, Aleksander?"

He goes to answer, but his mouth is full of water, which somehow manages to taste like salt even though this is a river, and not an ocean. Or maybe it's both. Maybe he's lost in the expanse of the

sea.

“How fully can you drown?”

He loses his footing. He reaches for her.

She brings the hand holding the rock back, before throwing it forward. Toward his temple.

His mouth is dry and tastes stale. He swallows hard, looking around. There is the rough, scratching feel of bandages around his arms and leg.

“Alina?” He croaks.

“Don’t worry,” she says, and he turns to see her sitting beside him, book open across her lap. She is not looking at him. “I haven’t decided to let you die yet.”

He moves his tongue over his lips. They are dry, chapped, and cracked. “Where is your rock?”

Her light brown eyes move up from the page, and she frowns. “My what?”

“Your rock. In your hand.”

Alina snorts. “All I have in my hand is you.”

Aleksander’s eyes focus on the book. And he sees that the hand not holding it open is wrapped around his.

His eyes close again.

The birds fly overhead, in the shape of storm clouds. Their feathers float down towards him in slow, smooth crescents. He is standing on the prow of a ship.

He catches one in a slow descent, and stares at it as he twirls the end between his fingers. In that moment, suspended and surrounded by dark feathers, he thinks he can manage an easy breath.

But the birds do not stay birds. They become monsters. Their feathers become teeth. And one flies low, swiping its talons across his face, trying to take his eyes.

“*Kefta*,” he rasps into the stillness of the night, “could resist rifle fire.”

Alina glares at him from over the top of her book. Maybe she is thinking that it is not too late to kill him in his sleep.

“That’s what you get for taking over an army that doesn’t belong to you.”

His lips twitch up into a smile, and he hopes she sees it, even though his face is only a silhouette in the dark of her cabin. “Kidnapped?”

She does not return the expression. “Bullets.”

He falls beneath the water, hand pressing towards the surface to discover only ice. He is thinking he has no choice but to drown, fully, until he sees a single ray of light streaming through the water, breaking the surface and allowing him air before he sinks to the bottom.

His eyes adjust to the dark easily, as they always have. And he looks to see her at his side again, a ghost of his conscious state. She is not reading a book this time. Instead, she is wrapped within a blanket, eyes glaring at a failed attempt of knitting in her lap.

He takes a deep breath. “Where are we?”

Everything about her goes still, as if she does not want to answer the question. But she does, just after he accepts that silence is going to be his only answer.

“...my home.”

Miles away, Maksim Lantsov signs a directive that gives the conquered Fjerdan territories a new, official name: Novoravka.

xxviii.

It takes him three weeks to fully heal, but after the first week, Alina disappears on him once again. He is stranded, somewhere in the cold, and convinced that she has abandoned him to a pathetic, frozen fate in an equally pathetic and frozen cabin when she arrives just as he is able to walk without stiffness.

And she arrives with a *sled* of all things. It’s loaded with what appears to be supplies: furs, food, and what looks like paper. It’s archaic. And he decides that it’s good that he didn’t leave as he desired to, after that first week alone. There are no roads and sleds can only mean they are somewhere in the remote.

Alina stares at him, and he notices that when she looks at him from the top of his head to the bottom of his boots, it is not with the appraising stare of desire. Instead, it’s like something a child might give an insect under a magnifying glass—as if she’s trying to discover what appendages can grow back.

“You’ve made yourself at home,” she says dryly.

He is wearing clothes he found in her cabin. And he does not like entertaining why she might have a man’s jacket and pants folded tidily in a chest.

“There was little else to do.”

The Darkling’s gaze moves toward the sled, where she has blankets strapped down to the end. His lips must curl in distaste, because Alina smirks.

“I had you strapped down there, too. After the battle. Like luggage.”

He feels his lips tug down into a frown before Alina throws a bag of provisions at his chest.

“Time to earn your keep.”

The Darkling stares at the bag of what appears to be flour in his hands for several, long seconds. As if he's never seen it before.

Alina doesn't look back at him as she goes inside to the cabin, though she leaves the door open behind her.

Conquered lands are not patriotic.

Tsaritsa Oksana sends contingents of soldiers to guard the new settlements belonging to Ravka. And they are almost all Grisha, for it has become public opinion after the death of *Tovarish* Starkov that only the Grisha have the power to ward off Fjerda. That they are the most capable.

Her decision is met with respect by some. Hostility with most. For it is common knowledge that those of Fjerda *burn* their Grisha.

The Grisha feel they are thrown to the wolves, the *otkazat'sya* feel inadequate. The people who were once Fjerdan find themselves Ravkan, and are angrier for it. Everyone must rebuild together, but production is not what it used to be.

Conquered lands are not wealthy. Conquered lands are not balanced.

Conquered lands are not safe.

It's unsettling, to say the least. Watching the Darkling injured, watching him recover. Watching him shelve provisions and make tea and just. Seem so human. Though it is, admittedly, a little less unsettling than watching him sweat out an infection and bleed all over her good linens. And it's far less unsettling than thinking about why she's allowing him to stay here, in her home. Why she allowed him to survive the Fjerdan ambush.

Alina sighs, returning to her knitting. She's had over a century to practice it, but can still only manage lopsided sweaters at best and gnarls of what should be potholders at worst. Time, it appears, doesn't always lead to mastery.

It's been a week since she returned from the nearby Fjerdan village with supplies, and the pair of them have lead an uneasy co-existence since. Well, uneasy for her. The Darkling appears as if he's been born in a log cabin in the middle of nowhere. He cuts wood. He stocks provisions. During the day he disappears for hours and returns as if nothing is different. And Alina doesn't know what to make of it. She doesn't know what to make of *him*, anymore.

At night they don't speak much to each other, and it's almost like they're back in the War Tent with the Bol'shoy again. Her, finding things to occupy her mind so she doesn't have to question the sanity of her decision, and him, occupied with whatever his thoughts are and staring at her like she's some kind of puzzle.

He hasn't touched her. But she feels like he wants to. Because she sees the way his stares don't stay just on her face. Because she knows him, and she's known what he's wanted for some time now. But he sleeps on her spare bed, tucked underneath the window that the sun hits first in the mornings.

Alina goes back to her hideous knitting. The Darkling makes tea. Sometimes they play chess together. And domesticity feels like the heavy weight in the air before a thunderstorm.

The first week of Novoravka's occupation, the Bol'shoy contingent is forced to execute six rebels for conspiracy. Five of the insurgents are originally Fjerdans. But one is a Ravkan.

"What happens when I leave?"

Alina doesn't look up from the goats she is feeding. The cabin isn't illustrious, but she has enough land to herself where she can house a small hobby farm. Two goats, the female of which—Babushka—is expecting, and four chickens. It's been five weeks since the death of Tovarish Starkov, and two since he's been conscious enough to coexist with her.

And she notices that he says *when* and not *if*. Not that she expected anything else.

"Depends on where you're leaving to." She feeds Babushka the last of the sweet rolls she's been stockpiling in secret, smiling as the goat playfully licks granules of sugar off of her palm.

"Where else would I go?"

Alina sighs, watching Babushka almost wistfully for one more moment before turning to face him, wiping her hand off on her apron. It's still so strange, to see him wearing the old peasant clothes. To see him acting like he has the life of a mouse.

"I don't know. Travel? See the world without trying to conquer it?"

His cold eyes meet hers, and though it is spring and still somewhat warm, she can almost see puffs of steam coming with his exhale. "We were conquered first."

We. Like they belong with the Grisha. They don't. They don't belong anywhere, which is something Alina is all too familiar with.

"Don't go to Ravka."

The Darkling takes a step forward, and she takes a step back almost automatically. He frowns for a quick moment, but it's gone just as fast. "Or."

Babushka nuzzles her nose into Alina's apron. She sighs before feeding the goat another sweet roll. "Or I try and stop you."

"How."

Alina wonders how it's not obvious enough. "Any way that I can."

The Darkling absently pats Babushka on the head as she searches his pockets for food. The goat wobbles away, unsatisfied. He stares at Alina for a few more moments before he nods, retreating just as silently as he left.

Alina is about to gather eggs when she hears his voice carry over.

"The Fjerdan and Ravkan border was an interesting hole to bury yourself in."

She scowls, not surprised he knows where they are in the wilderness, but not happy about it either, and has no response as she marches back to feed the chickens.

Sometimes, the sound of change is quiet. It is the sound of stale bread crusts, being broken at a table. The sound of small coughs, hidden behind scarves. It is the sound of missives, quickly crumpled into hands.

Revolution can be silent. And Novoravka will be a land doomed to thirst for war.

xxix.

They start playing chess nearly every night together.

“Why would you leave?” Alina asks him in a measured tone, as she takes his queen.

The Darkling doesn’t divert his attention from the board. “Opportunity.”

The next morning he is making porridge when he senses her irritation across the room.

“What kind of opportunity are you hoping for?”

He spoons more brown sugar into his bowl. “One that presents itself.”

“What would keep you away from the Bol’shoy?”

“Little.”

For three more weeks, they have chess in the evening and porridge for breakfast. Until one morning he decides to leave, and Alina decides to stop him.

xl.

She’s not sure what enrages her more: that he is choosing *now* to leave without ceremony for the first time, or that he’s choosing to do so with *her* sled.

Alina’s in the middle of repairing Babushka and Dedushka’s fence when she feels something she hasn’t felt in sometime. That magnetic, unmistakable *pull* between them becomes strained, and she turns just in time to see that the Darkling’s taking half of her food stores and tying them down to her sled.

She moves without thinking, drawing her arm down hard.

The flash of her Cut illuminates the field in front of her home, and the sled gives a harsh, wooden *crack* as it splits in half with a bright arc of light.

She hears him sigh as he surveys the wreckage, even though his back is to hers. “Alina.”

“That was my only sled.”

“I’m aware.”

Alina straightens, setting down her hammer and walking away from the goats’ fence. As she approaches him, she does not release the tension in the muscles of her arm. “Where are you going, Aleksander?”

He turns. Alina sees the resolve in his stare. And she knows that, finally, it’s come down to this. To the two of them using their opposing powers against each other. In a way it’s a relief. Because it’s too easy, to forget that someone who is mediocre at chess and fond of too much sugar in his breakfast, is also someone who destroys for the sake of it.

“Ravka.”

She brings down her arm again, but he anticipates it, and her Cut less than harmlessly slices into the tree just behind him as he moves.

“You’ve practiced,” he says coldly, and she sees the way his arms are moving up, ready to clap together in that thunderous *boom* that brings them all to the dark.

She aims another Cut. It digs a furrow just in front of his feet. “I can do more than that.”

His hands still, for a moment. “I’ve never had a doubt.”

And then he claps them together.

Alina takes a deep inhale as the darkness swallows her. Her entire body coils, ready to spring into an attack as she tries to draw the sun from the shadows. As she tries to find her focus, something pushes her, and she staggers until she feels her body brace against the outside wall of her cabin. Dread twists in her chest as she listens for the sound of the *nichevo’ya*, the long-forgotten wound of her shoulder flaring with phantom pain.

She takes a deep breath and brings her hands together.

The shadows split in two, forming a fissure with her on one end, and him on the other. His eyes are narrowed in fury, as he advances towards her.

“You’d kill me, even still?”

She doesn’t want to think about the answer to that question. So instead, she slashes her arm down again. Her Cut dances past him, grazing his arm lightly enough that part of his sleeve flutters to the ground. He sneers at it with distaste, before moving in on her again. Alina takes a careful step back, until she realizes that she is retreating into the cabin, its door wide open.

“Why aren’t you using your Cut?” She finally mutters, bringing her hands up defensively in front of her face. Her fingers glint with the light of the sun.

The Darkling follows her in to the cabin, and she sends more power into her hands but doesn’t release it. He shakes his head, and she sees for the first time the heavy set to his shoulders, the dark circles under his eyes.

“Why aren’t you aiming?”

Alina closes her eyes. “I am aiming.”

“Aiming to kill. We both know you’re more than capable of it.”

She shakes her head, opening her eyes to see that he is less than a foot from her. Pulling from combat lessons several lifetimes ago, she lashes out with her fist, hoping to catch him off guard as her other hand sparks with the Cut.

He slams in to her instead, his long fingers catching her fist before they wrap around her wrist, and he uses his height and weight to his advantage when he pins her against a wall. The sunlight around her hands flares, and she goes to push him off of her when-

“Enough.”

His tone is distant, but Alina can see something dark and barely restrained in his features. As his grip digs into the soft underside of her wrist, Alina knows *Enough* isn’t meant just as a command to disarm. She looks at him, into his eyes, for several long, tense moments before she reaches a decision she hopes she won’t regret.

Alina curls her fingers, and the sunlight sparks off them as her Cut dissolves.

The Darkling watches her hand with a measured amount of caution, as if a single moment of vulnerability from him will cause her to fire. It’s not an unwarranted hesitance. She’s cut him before.

“Don’t go to Ravka, and it’ll be enough,” Alina finally responds, looking at the lines on his face, and her eyes dart down, just for a moment, to the hollow of his throat. The lean muscles of his shoulders. It’s intentional, of course. A calculation. An offer. His next breath goes in like a hiss, but his eyes do not stray from her own.

“I’m tired, Alina.”

“We’re all tired.”

One of his arms wraps around the small of her back, and the heavy counter of it makes her shift, leaning against him. But feeling the press of his body against hers, the cool grip on her wrist, isn’t enough to make her blush anymore. She is, as he said in spite so long ago, no longer a girl. She hasn’t been a girl for some time. It’s a different kind of heat that colors her cheeks, now.

He steps forward, making the two of them move tighter against the wall. She returns her eyes to his as he presses her wrist up above her head.

“Tell me you’ll share my name.”

She frowns. “No.”

The hand not gripping her wrist moves to her shoulder, undoing the fastens of her cloak with all the careful, deliberate movement of a violinist. “Then tell me why I shouldn’t go to Ravka.”

The cloak slides off of her like water, creating a pool of fabric at their feet.

Alina does not break eye contact as she moves her leg between his. “Because I’m asking nicely.”

“I didn’t know you were capable of such things.”

“I’m plenty capable.”

His heart is thrumming in his chest—she can feel the vibrations against her own in this proximity.

And it's empowering, to know that she can have this effect on him. That, if she desired, she can use a wholly different weapon to bring him to his knees. She shifts the leg she has between his further up, brushing against the in-seam of his trousers. He bites down on his lip, but they both keep eye contact.

The Darkling's fingers move to rest heavily on her hip, dancing slow torturous circles over its crest. She can feel his skin, the heat and the weight of it, as if she were wearing nothing at all. She forces her breath to come in slowly, to exhale steadily. She forces herself to not give anything away until she is ready to exchange it.

"You want this," he says, and the words are spoken as if they are already fact, despite the quiet tone of disbelief.

"I want you to stay out of Ravka."

"Is that all."

No, it's not all. They have always held a connection between them, and there has always been a yearning for the darker things he can offer her. But she has always denied it, because the acceptance of it meant accepting those shadowed parts she would prefer to keep hidden. But now, after losing Mal, after losing Nikolai, after losing more and more, it is easier to crave that darkness. Because she knows she cannot lose him, this monster of hers. And right now, as he lightly presses the edge of his thumb to the beating pulse at her wrist, she realizes there has always been something in her that has never *wanted* to lose him.

But if she is going to surrender, now, to him, she is going to set the terms.

"You can have me, or you can have Ravka. But not both. So choose--"

His mouth descends on hers so fast that her head is almost knocked into the wall. The hand around her wrist tightens, painfully, before it drops down to cradle the back of her neck. Alina takes a sharp breath through her nose as she feels his lips move over her own, hot and searing and demanding. His long fingers flex, digging up through her hair and pulling her possessively closer. She barely has enough time to part her lips before he pushes his tongue past them, trailing an almost velvety pattern along the inside of her mouth.

His hips are flushed with hers, their legs still intertwined, and she's intensely aware of the pressure as he brings the hand on her hip to her back in a quick, grasping movement. His fingers are sliding down to cup the back of her thigh when she feels his anger lash out at her through their bond. His frustration. His desperation. His need.

His decision.

Once, so very long ago, these emotions made her uneasy. Now they only spur her actions further.

Alina leans back against the wall, using it as a leverage in order to bring the thigh he is cupping around his waist. She feels him already straining against his trousers as she pushes her heel into the small of his back, the friction making her arch her body just enough to force him to release a groan. The Darkling's grip on her thigh tightens, and just as the pads of his fingers press harsh enough against her skin to cause bruises, she is distracted from the pain by him slowly sucking her lower lip between his own.

When he releases her mouth, he moves quickly. His tongue lands a second before his lips on her skin as he trails a line down the column of her neck, starting with the corner of her jaw, the space

beneath it, the expanse of her collarbone, the back of her ear. His movements are fast and desperate, erratic. She closes her eyes, trying to get some bearing on the situation, but he moves as if he is starving, as if he does not have enough time to take every inch he desires to take.

She slides her hands up his back, underneath his shirt. He tenses with her touch. Alina's palms glide across his skin, fingertips dancing across the edges of his shoulder blades.

Alina gives a startled gasp as he moves his arm from her thigh to lift her hips fully against him, and she wraps her other leg around his body to keep upright. He wraps his arm around her back to support her against him, as his other hand buries itself in her hair again and pulls, forcing her to expose more of her neck to him.

He kisses her throat again, before bringing his mouth to her ear. His voice is a growled rasp, "You," he takes her ear into his mouth for a brief second, still a starving man in a race against some perceived time limit, "Make me so *weak*."

She can't help the pant that escapes her as she squeezes her thighs tighter against the edges of his waist. "Good."

The hand in her hair pulls again, and she feels a sharp jab of his anger entwined with his lust through their tether. He bites lightly at her throat, and she gives a groan at the stinging sensation before he is running his tongue over her skin instead. And Alina rolls her eyes despite the pleasant wave of desire that's filling her. Because of course he would want to mark her, to leave the trail of him over her in red, angry patterns. She briefly wonders if he is making a trace of where the antlers hung around her, so long ago. But then she registers that he has started to move, to guide the pair of them back to the edge of her bed.

He sits on it first, drawing her onto his lap. Her knees sink into the mattress on either side of his waist, her hands move from his back to his chest. He lets the hand in her hair trail down to cup her face instead, and with that one motion the reality of what is about to happen actually hits her. They stay there, for a moment, his breathing ragged and the physical proof of his desire pressed against where the inside of her thigh meets her hip. Her neck is angry and red as she runs her tongue slowly over her swollen bottom lip before she bites down on it.

The Darkling looks as surprised as she is when his voice comes out as more of a whisper than a command, "Kiss me."

Alina manages a grin, trying to keep her heart steady, trying not to rip off her clothes, or run for the door, "Ask nicely."

Instead he stares, moving from her eyes, to her lip that is still caught gently in her teeth, to her neck, lingering there for a moment before he watches his thumb trace across the bone of her cheek. She looks at him, looking at her, and she lets out a slow breath.

"I hate you, sometimes, for this," he says before she can speak.

"For making you beg?"

"For making me want to."

His fingers move to her shirt, and still staring into her eyes, he begins to undo the buttons. It's a quiet challenge, to see how long she will allow him, and Alina moves her hands to clench at the blankets by her ankles so he doesn't see her fingers fidget.

"All you have to do is say please," she blurts, because she is not sure what else to do when he is

staring at her like she is something he needs to survive.

Suddenly the corners of his lips turn up, "I'd much rather hear the word from you."

The awkward laugh escapes her mouth before she can stop it, and she looks away, down at her hands still holding onto the blankets. She misses the quick tightening of his jaw.

His hands continue their task, slowly undoing her shirt button by button. His voice is level, calm, "How many lovers have you had, Alina?"

She looks back, an eyebrow raising, "Don't worry, I think I'm experienced enough to keep up."

His fingers still with tension, "Is that. So."

Alina frowns, "Yes--"

His mouth crashes against hers, silencing the rest of her words. Alina continues to frown, until she hears the sound of something tearing and the unmistakable noise of buttons falling onto the floor, and she breaks away from him.

"You--"

"*Later,*" he hisses, moving his hands to tear away what's left of her shirt from her shoulders, mouth kissing her neck again, fingers ghosting over the skin that is now exposed. She's wearing nothing but a simple camisole underneath, and he is already working on pushing the straps down.

Alina's head is spinning, and part of her is whispering *too fast*, but then he is kissing her again and that whisper fades with the sound of her pounding heartbeat and the desperate need to understand the erratic path his mouth leaves on her skin. Her fingers tighten in the blanket when he moves to kiss the skin of her shoulders, trailing lower and lower until he is at the top of the swell of her breast. The hand not pulling away the fabric of her camisole moves to hold her calf, pushing up the edge of her skirt to hold bare skin. His touch feels like a brand, and Alina finds her hands moving up from her ankles and into his hair, pushing him closer to her as he takes a slow, torturous lick across the left side of her collarbone.

"Take it off," he mutters, moving back to her neck.

She closes her eyes and tries to get her breathing to slow down, "Or what. You'll rip this one, too?"

"*Alina.*"

"Take it off for me."

The camisole tears, and she smiles against his lips as he kisses her on the mouth again. The air is cold on her exposed breasts, but it takes him only a second to cover one with his hand. She lets out a sharp intake of breath as her nipple grazes his palm, and his long fingers move to cup her with leisurely movements that are at odds with the way he continues to kiss every exposed inch of skin she has. He moves the hand from her calf to her other breast, his thumb lightly pressing against her other nipple.

She is losing the battle to keep her breathing slow.

And she can feel every word against her skin when he speaks to her throat, "I won't let you go back from this."

Alina moves a hand back into his hair, letting the dark, silky strands run over her fingers like water, "...okay."

His hands continue their gentle caresses, forming a light tattoo on her skin. It's enough to drive her crazy, "And I want you to say my name."

She sighs, feeling a tension starting to build in her abdomen as his fingers move lazy circles on her chest, and she decides she can allow him this concession if it means something faster, "Aleksander."

He shifts his hips underneath hers, and suddenly she feels him pressed hard against the apex of her thighs. She rotates her hips slowly in retaliation, and his inhales become as quick as her own before he lowers his mouth to replace one of his hands. His tongue is a gentle heat as it teases the tip of her breast, and when his lips close over her nipple, it's in a way that forces her fingers to dig into his scalp. He traces his tongue around the sensitive nerves over and over again, until the tension that is slowly building in her finally becomes a low, heady throb instead.

"Stop," she mutters.

"Why."

"I want this even, between us."

He looks up, and without another word he is pulling off his shirt in fast, jerky movements until it lies in a discarded lump on the floor. Then he stops, letting her look at him. She does, though she doubts it's with the lens he desires. She knows he has a more wiry than stocky form, knows that his muscles are tight, lean cords instead of prominent bundles. And even at his worst, there's always been something about the Darkling that's desirable to her, something they're both more than aware of.

So instead of staring at him with appeal or lust, she takes stock of his scars. Alina meets his cool, grey stare. His gaze is intense, and she can see from the tension in the muscles of his neck that he is restraining himself for her sake. That it's his turn, for a concession.

Alina's movements are slow as she presses her lips to every puckered bullet wound, as she kisses every jagged edge and burn. She can see his chest rising and falling faster with what she assumes is anticipation, until there is only one scar left.

Where she plunged her knife into his chest is a deceptively simple mark, straight and clean. But it's dark, almost purple. The scar starts from the hollow of his throat and trails down the entire length of his sternum, and she traces it with her fingers before she traces it with her tongue. The Darkling is breathing in near pants as she does so, one hand grabbing her hip as the other covers her shoulder, his fingers moving in a pattern that she knows is tracing the marks from his *nichevo'ya* on her skin. It's twisted, but in this way, they belong to each other.

The Darkling's voice is husky with want when he speaks, breaking the hush between them, "Lie back."

She smirks against his chest, "And think of Ravka?"

Alina almost misses the sound of his sigh, but before she can comment on it, he grabs her around the waist and places her back against the mattress. For a moment, he hovers over her in what looks like contemplation, and she stares back at him, a frown tugging on her lips as she tilts her head to the side.

“What?” She asks, suddenly wondering how many chins she must have from this angle.

He only continues to look at her as if she’s something new. As if she isn’t the same thing she’s always been for the last two hundred some years, “...I’m still waiting for you to run for the door,” he finally admits, looking troubled.

Alina feels an actual laugh escape her, “The thought crossed my mind.”

“Only crossed?” And she hears something vulnerable in his question, something so completely human, that it makes her own voice go softer when she replies.

“I’m staying.”

As quickly as it opened, that strange, human window of his closes once again, and the Darkling only nods in response. Satisfied. It’s enough to make her want to throw him into a wall, if not for that still present ache between her legs.

Without warning, the Darkling grabs her hips and drags her body down until her legs dangle off the edge of the mattress. And Alina has just enough time to wonder what he’s doing before he’s pulling off her skirt with a deft, no doubt well-practiced, motion. Like her cloak, forgotten by the doorway somewhere, it makes a pool on the ground. Alina pushes herself up until she’s lying back in a half-lean, her weight supported by her elbows. She watches as the Darkling also makes quick work of her undergarments, and as she lies there naked, she wonders if he completely missed the statement about things being even between them.

The Darkling crouches down on the floor, kneeling enough so that they are only a little less than eye-level with each other. His stare rakes over her in a way that leaves her little room to be self-conscious, and she watches his hand slowly trail up her bare thigh. He brings his grey stare to meet with her own and she, once again, bites down on her lip.

“Alina,” he says quietly.

Alina can see her chest rising and falling with her breath, a repetitive motion that makes the quiet cabin seem even more still, “Yes?”

“You won’t be thinking of Ravka.”

Not moving from where he is kneeling, the Darkling parts her legs and presses a slow kiss between them.

The fingers he has on her leg begin to move back and forth across her skin, a slow dance that runs counter to the sudden tenseness that is forming at her core. She bites down harder as she feels his lips part against her, before they close gently again, this time on her clit. She’s dimly aware of his other hand reaching up to cup her breast, but the sensation of his thumb rubbing lightly over her nipple is secondary to the feel of his tongue dragging up and down her center with a painfully slow pace.

Her head falls back after he finds a particularly sensitive spot, and it makes her waist rise in protest. In response, the hand on her thigh moves up to firmly grab her hip, holding it back down against the mattress. The fingers of her left hand dig once again into the blankets, clenching sheets between them, as her right hand impulsively begins to thread through his hair. Alina can feel that deep pressure within her strain as the Darkling’s mouth teases her entrance.

Alina closes her eyes, her breathing no longer pretending to be even as he continues. He moves his hand from her breast to blindly pad at the space of mattress by her hips. She opens her eyes,

surprised when she realizes that what he's searching for is her hand. Mutely, Alina guides her fingers in between his own, and he grips them just as his lips make her arch her back.

The syllables slip out before she can stop them, "Aleks--"

When he groans, she feels the hot breath across her thigh.

He straightens from his kneeling position, but does not fully pull away, "Do you want me, Alina?"

Damn him. She can feel her need in almost every muscle of her body, and no doubt he knew it. It's obvious from the way he's still gripping her hip, "Fine."

The Darkling's eyebrows arch, "Fine?"

Alina is sure her teeth are grinding, "*Fine.*"

He surprises her by smiling, and bringing their joined hands to his lips. He presses a soft kiss to the back of hers, before he uses his other hand to slowly undo his trousers. She moves back on the bed to allow him more room, and as soon as he is as naked as she is, he takes it. His knees rest between her legs, and he brings their hands up over her head, placing their arms against the mattress. The fact that her fingers are still entwined with his is strangely more intimate than feeling his naked body against her skin.

The Darkling doesn't speak, and doesn't look away from Alina's eyes as he enters her.

His hips move slowly, in punctuated thrusts that are at odds with his earlier fervor. She brings her knees up before once again winding her legs around him, ankles crossed at the small of his back. When he pushes into her it's with a measured control that is betrayed with his ragged breathing, with the fingers that tighten almost desperately around her own. She matches his pace, despite the urgency she feels deep within her.

Their bodies move as if they were always meant to move like this together. As if they have already done this hundreds of times before. And yet, only this once.

She whispers his name into his ear when she climaxes, and it's only then that he allows himself to lose control. And a few desperate, hurried thrusts later, Aleksander moans and returns the favor.

A few hours later, Alina is roused from her sleep by insistent kisses trailing over the scar on her shoulder. She keeps her eyes closed, but he must know she's awake because he whispers "Again." in her ear.

Alina sighs, but climbs on top of him and decides to oblige his rudely-worded request.

xli.

He stays.

But the life of the mouse is not something he will ever find satisfaction in. And they both know that what they're doing, how they're playing these simple roles with simple destinies, is only a temporary fixture. A diversion from the war they will eventually return to.

And it's a pleasant diversion. One that he aims to use to his advantage. For there are many ways to

get Alina to Ravka, to the throne where she belongs next to him. And if it means he must feed chickens, or repair sleds, or lose at chess, then he is capable of biding his time until she realizes where they both must go.

Until then, he'll indulge his weakness.

They have two years together at her pathetic cabin, before he is able to convince her to move into the neighboring, Fjerdan city of Ledsen. She doesn't believe him when he says he desires interaction with people, but Fjerda is still not Ravka, and so she packs her carpet bag, her sled, her two goats, and five chickens, and follows him there.

What he really desires is news of Os Alta. Of Novoravka. Of what he left behind, and of what he can one day reclaim with Alina beside him.

Their neighbors in Ledsen assume they are husband and wife. He is...surprised, when Alina does not correct them.

"*You* try explaining what we are." Is all she offers in return to his no doubt startled expression.

Pretending to be *otkazat'sya* is a suffocating experience. But it's one he bears, in order to befriend Knut, the trapper. And Ole, the ex-mercenary. To hear the local stories at the tavern. To listen to these insignificant people curse his country and fear his kind.

But it's only a matter of time. And that's a game he knows well.

It won't be long, before they're suffering just as much as they wish the Grisha and Ravka to suffer. The thought is comforting.

After five more years in Ledsen, it has been long enough since Tsaritsa Lantsov, and Alina eventually stops dyeing her hair.

There are nights—when he sees the white strands of it against his pillow, when he feels her legs sprawled over his, and when her elbow digs into his side even in sleep—that he finds he cannot fathom the experience, or what it means to him, into words.

When ten years have passed, they move from Ledsen to another Fjerdan village: Nya Livet. The irony is not lost on either of them.

Often, when the weight of *otkazat'sya* becomes more like a yoke than wings, they practice their abilities in the dark woods of the village outskirts. It is during one of these sessions that the Darkling asks her where she keeps her final amplifier.

The question seems to sting her, but she only shakes her head when she determines the question is, for once, not aimed maliciously. Merely curious.

“I’ll tell you one day,” is all she whispers. And that night, she does not lie next to him in their bed.

Three years after they move to Ny Livet, a circus comes through the town. The Darkling stares at the white tiger in its cage as it passes by. The animal is pacing angrily up and down the length of his prison, waiting to be freed, and he feels an uneasy sense of kinship.

Four years after that, they are sitting together. And as they rest in front of the fire like they did years ago in Baghra’s hut, he asks her again.

She closes her eyes, and gives a long, slow exhale. “For a little while.”

His grip tightens around her and he smiles in a way that might just be sincere.

When they move from Ny Livet to Sammanboende, Alina is introduced as Morozova.

He has no doubt she notices that every move brings them closer to Novoravka. After all, she was once a cartographer, when she was pretending to be nothing.

They have their diversion for nearly thirty-five years, through four villages and two names, when it comes to an end after the Darkling hears a rumor in a tavern.

xlii.

Sammanboende is almost agreeable. And as somewhere that’s almost agreeable, there are occasionally days that are pleasant. The day that Alina’s life crashes is such an agreeable day.

For once, she doesn’t have to work at her job in the snus factory, and instead she spends the day painting. The walls of her kitchen are slowly becoming decorated in trees, and half of them even look realistic. There’s almost a sense of tranquility, in doing something so menial. It’s not the luxury of the palace, or the comfortable seclusion of her cabin, but whatever is happening is something that is almost becoming home.

Almost. There’s always almosts.

Because no matter what name she’s currently wearing, or where they’re currently living, the Darkling is still the man who burned down her first one. Part of her can never forget that.

She’s in the middle of her thoughts and the third tree, when the door to their home opens. She doesn’t look up from her paint, instead focusing on the shading. His presence is still like a lead weight in the room.

“Alina.”

She closes her eyes, because she is starting to know him. And with him, she is starting to know what that tone means. “What is it.”

“We need to return to Ravka.”

His voice is so distant, so calm from where it sounds that Alina automatically assumes something is wrong. She puts down the paint brush, and slowly hops down from the counter she was sitting on. Her hands work nervous knots as she dries them on a rag.

Alina looks over her shoulder, and doesn’t like what she sees.

The Darkling leans against the walkway that leads into their kitchen, arms crossed over his chest. He looks tired, in a way he has not been since before the Bol’shoy. But worse, he also looks ready—a man on the ocean braced for an incoming storm.

“...What’s wrong?” Alina asks slowly, and she knows she isn’t going to like what comes next.

She’s right.

“The Lantsov royal family has been assassinated.”

While revolutions can be silent, they are almost never bloodless.

It is all the taverns can gossip about. How the Lantsovs were murdered in the Grand Palace, one night following their winter fete, by insurgents who infiltrated the palace as servants. The soldiers who killed the royal family only left one mark to claim ownership of their deeds:

A red flag, with double white eagles. It’s the flag of Novoravka.

In Fjerda, mugs of ale are connected together overhead with cheers of “Skål Novo!”

In Sammanboende, over a century of hiding from grief finally catches up to Alina Morozova. Once Alina Lantsov.

xliii.

Loss eats at her, taking her away piece by piece, as more news travels to the Fjerdan woods. She learns that Novoravkans occupy Os Alta. That there are no surviving Lantsovs, not even the children, *their* children. That the Ravkan Grisha stationed in Novoravka are being burned on pyres in the wake of the assassinations’ success.

The more she learns, the more that is burned away. And soon there is nothing left but an aching, angry hole within her. And it is a space that demands vengeance.

One morning, the Darkling wakes and she is not beside him. There are only tracks in the snow outside of their home.

He already knows they lead to the Novoravkan military camp only two miles away (he has been moving them closer, after all).

She is ready to turn away, to forget why she's come to their outpost and to find another way to salvage what is left, before she smells the smoke. It stings her eyes, and as she makes her way to the entrance gate of the military base, the air is thick with it.

A man wearing all black stops her. "You are not authorized to be here."

His hands are curled tightly around a rifle. And Alina cannot see his face, or think about what his name might be or who loves him, because she can only see that rifle. She can only see that rifle firing.

"What are you burning?" Is all she asks instead, and she feels tears brimming up into her eyes.

The man sneers, and spits at the ground. "*Häxa*."

Witch.

She moves with intention, drawing her arm down hard.

The flash of her Cut illuminates the gate, before it is split diagonally in half.

Instead of faces, Alina sees Ana smiling as she learns how to swim for the very first time in their family pond. Instead of screams, Alina hears the first waltz the orchestra played at her wedding, when her husband told her there was more to them than Ravka.

Time heals all things, but grief never leaves. And pain so easily lends itself to destruction.

So she becomes a burning star, expanding before collapsing in its death.

Years later, her actions that day will earn her a new name in Fjerda. In the tales before bed, after parents tell their children to be good, but before they pray, they will tell them a story. It tells of a white-haired witch, beautiful and terrifying, who once destroyed an entire army because the proper sacrifices were not made to the gods. As a lady of war, she claimed the deaths of the army for her own, before throwing herself onto a pyre in the ultimate gesture of reverence. The story of *Det Vita Offret* is used to frighten children into attending religious ceremonies when they would rather sleep in the early hours of morning.

It's Fjerdan for the White Martyr.

xliv.

He follows the smoke.

What was once a camp is now nothing but ruin. The gate is bent in half, the barracks are split with clean, neat edges. The Novoravkan rebels on the ground have wounds that are neatly cauterized, made by a heat much stronger than fire. There is a pyre in the middle of the camp, destroyed and

surrounded by blue, red, and purple armbands. There is nothing living here.

Or at least, that's what he believes, until he hears a rasping laugh.

The Darkling moves quickly, locating a single man still hanging on to life. His eyes are maniac, crazed, and looking upwards as he speaks.

"They got the witch." The dying man smiles with bloody teeth as he stares up into the sun. "And they're going to burn her. In front of everyone."

His entire body seems to grow cold. "*Where.*"

"Kopingbran."

It's a smaller village, further into Novoravka.

The dying man barks out a laugh. "I hope she screams."

The Darkling's hand draws down quickly, and the man has nothing left to laugh about, his eyes forever frozen on the blinding sun.

Kopingbran is a small village, remotely located near a wide river where most of its inhabitants fish for salmon. It surrendered to Fjerdan occupation without resistance nearly forty-five years ago, then Ravkan after that, and then finally Novoravkan. The people there live humbly, but contently. It committed no other crime than being too weak, too quiet to fight.

It has a population of about two hundred.

When the Darkling arrives to Kopingbran, he sees a woman tied to a pyre. She is unconscious, her white hair moving softly in the gusts from the torches that surround it. She is circled by men with rifles, by people chanting *Häxa*.

It does not take long until the village of Kopingbran has a population much smaller. Until most of the buildings and its people are torn apart by monsters that only have gaping mouths for faces.

Sometimes, the story of *Det Vita Offret* ends with the god of death taking her away in his arms.

xlv.

The Darkling carries her until they are far enough away from their ruin, walking through the thick drifts of the snow as the wind blows away the smell of smoke from both of their bodies. After an hour or so, she wakes, and both stay silent even though her fingers are clenched in his jacket and his arms are tight around her body.

He finally manages to speak. "What happened."

She remains silent.

"Tell me."

Alina takes a breath: “I Cut.”

Two syllables that say so much.

“Then what.”

“Put me down.”

“Then what.”

“Put me down, Aleksander.”

He does, and once her feet hit the ground, she increases the space between them. Her wrists are covered in angry, red welts where they had her chained. He can’t stop staring at them. He can’t help wishing he destroyed more than just the village.

Her eyes are dark, purple circles underneath making her appear sunken and tired. The Darkling takes an angry breath through his nostrils.

“What happened, Alina.”

She looks down.

“How were you captured.”

Alina bites on her lip, and one of her arms moves to hold the other.

His skin pales further with realization. “...you were going to let them have you.”

She looks down at her wrists, rubbing one of them to get the circulation flowing again. But Alina says nothing, and silence from her has always been synonymous with guilt. What settles within him can only be described as dread. She’s so many things that he hates, but she’s also an irreplaceable part of who he is now, and he won’t have her entertain such thoughts without his consent. She is not allowed to step away from them, to act like they mean nothing now.

He takes a deep breath. “Explain.”

Alina shakes her head, sighing and looking up. The winter sun of Fjerda shines brightly against the snowfall—reflecting every flake like white hot flares. They both consider them for a moment, before she speaks again.

“You asked me where I wear Mal, once.”

Rage replaces his dread effortlessly with the name. Because of course she means to leave him for something so trivial and useless. “What of it.”

Alina huddles deeper into her coat, walking away slowly with her back to him. Her footfalls make small impressions in the snow, before they are scattered away in the wind as if she has never been there at all. But her words still manage to carry as she retreats.

“Mal’s on my chest, because that’s where I stabbed him so that I might become a match for you. Mal’s under my fingernails, because that’s where his blood spilled when I held him. So that he wouldn’t die alone, without comfort. Mal’s written on my bones, because what I did to him is never, *ever* going to leave me. I wear Mal *everywhere*, Aleksander. And sometimes, I wonder if there’s only one way to take him off. I wonder if there’s only one way to take any of it off.”

He hates her with every inch of him in that moment. For holding on to the tracker, for somehow putting seventeen inconsequential years above the nearly two hundred and fifty they have had together. For punishing herself, because it makes his punishments to her less warranted. Because she *still* doesn't understand how much more they need each other than they could ever need anyone else. Because she's not letting go. Because she almost ruined the both of them in a desperate need for vengeance.

The Darkling crosses the field of snow with long, urgent strides until he is standing right behind her. "Tell me what I need to do to make you forget," he says, moving his arms so they wrap around her shoulders, pressing her back into him as he rests his chin on top of her head. "And I'll do it."

Alina sighs the sigh of an old woman, and her hands move to hold his forearms, where they are currently crossed over her chest. It's as if she wants to rip them away, but something stills her, and instead she does not move. They are at a standstill, once again, and finally she asks him a question that sounds like it has been on her mind for a long, long time.

"What is infinite, Aleksander?"

He frowns, the words coming from his lips like a lullaby half-forgotten. "The universe and the greed of men."

Her hands go limp where they are holding on to his arms. "And us."

The Darkling closes his eyes, pressing her tighter against him. His grip must hurt, it must suffocate, but Alina allows him to continue his embrace. He thinks about seeing her in the Fjerdan's grasps, how still she was on the pyre. Of what it would mean, to be alone once more after he knew what it meant to have her.

"No," and his voice breaks with an emotion he does not understand, "Not us."

As if strings were cut, he brings them both down to their knees in the snow. They stay like that, holding each other—him with desperation and her in defense—until the sun bleeds away from the sky like warmth from coals. Until they can feel nothing but each other's arms, sheltering them from the cold of the winter.

--

They return to their house, which will never be a home, and the next morning she agrees to go with him to Os Alta.

"They need to be stopped," she whispers against his naked chest, as they both watch the sun rise in the window. "And you'll be going there anyway. Maybe you'll need to be stopped, too."

He says nothing, moving his thumb slowly from side to side over the rounded edge of her shoulder. Over the scars he put there. And instead, he wonders at the kind of madness that makes a man continually bare his throat to the only woman who can hold a knife against it. It's a vulnerability that makes him uncomfortable, an unease in his chest, and his mind thinks of one word he has not allowed himself to think about in some time.

--

Alina's quiet as she packs, and he only watches. Her fingers fold what precious little she has decided to keep into a worn carpet bag. He sees nothing going in that would indicate sentimentality—no pictures, no keepsakes. He doesn't mention her moment of weakness with the pyre, and she doesn't mention his with the village.

Both understand this is a one-way journey.

They return home to civil war, and smoke hovering around the Grand Palace.

Chapter End Notes

The lullaby dream!Baghra is singing to Aleksander is a Soviet-era Russian song called “May There Always Be Sunshine”, the literal translation is: A sunny disk, the sky’s around it. This is a drawing by a young boy. He drew it on a sheet of paper, and signed it in the corner. May there always be sunshine, may there always be sky. May there always be mama, may there always be I.”

Here’s an audio recording of the chorus, if you want to hear it:

http://www.mamalisa.com/mp3/pust_vegda.mp3

The Civil War

Chapter Notes

Uff da, here we are! End of the line! Thank you so much to Dani and Hannah, who helped me work things out for the fic, and also to the fabulous Ms Bardugo for such a fun world and characters to play around with. And a big thank you for reading, especially for everyone who left notes, kudos, and comments <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

xlvi.

She remembers the first time she was a stranger to Os Alta. She had just been ripped away from Mal, from her entire life, and thrown into a carriage. She had just seen the man beside her split a Fjerdan in half for daring to threaten her.

Almost two hundred and fifty years later, she's a stranger for a second time, and it seems as if little has changed. He still kills for her, and, with a halo of smoke and red and white flags, the Grand Palace is still the ugliest building she's ever seen.

Their train is stopped about two miles outside of the heart of Os Alta. Men in black open their suitcases and go through their things. They search their compartment. It's not until they threaten to hold her for questioning (no, she doesn't have any travel papers with her name on them. No, she does not have family in the city. No, she does not work in the city) that Aleksander puts an arm around her shoulders and makes it clear that they are dismissed. It no doubt helps that both are now fluent in Fjerdan.

Around their shoulders are their rifles, and Alina's hands grow clammy and cold until both are out of sight.

They return with papers.

Officially, she is now Alina Morozova, wife of Aleksander Morozova, and they are Fjerdan citizens. She and her husband are required to stay in the outside districts of Os Alta while background checks are conducted. For their own safety. If they cooperate, that is also for their own safety.

He still hasn't moved his arm from her shoulders, though she doesn't know who he's trying to restrain by doing so.

Before they leave for the temporary lodging that has been set up on the fringes of the city, Alina dyes her hair back to brown in the sink of the train's bathroom. The person who looks at her in the mirror is young, but Alina sees scars in her eyes.

He watches her just as closely as he watches those who are proclaiming themselves Novoravkan. She is small again, something hard and cowered in on itself, a star that is baring its metal core. Her hair is brown, the skin under her eyes is bruise-purple, and he sees the way her hands shake when she catches sight of rifles. She is different, and he knows why.

Because now she is truly a soldier. Now she has used her Cut for Ravka, instead of just against him. She looks at those in black, and he is sure she is wondering how many of them she will have to kill to make her home restored. To avenge her progeny.

The Darkling vaguely remembers a man that was one of hers: a man with steel grey hair and only one dimple when he smiled. He doesn't remember his name, but he remembers he was a Lantsov. He wonders if Alina ever got to meet him, during her hidden time amongst the Bol'shoy. Wonders why it suddenly matters to him if she did.

Maybe it's because she's wearing her grief like a noose. And he is resolved to stop her from falling into it.

They will take back Ravka. And then he will take Alina back from her memories, piece by piece, until he is able to become her only shelter.

They are given a room to share with three others—an old Fjerdan woman and her two sons. The oldest of the sons stares at Alina too long for his liking, but he allows him to because the younger is talkative. And talk is what they need to plan their next steps, Fjerdan talk especially.

He learns from the younger one that, apparently, a mishap has happened with one of the border camps in Novoravka. None of the soldiers stationed near Kopingbran have given reports in months.

The Darkling does not know what Alina does with her time when he is away, learning as much as he can about the Novoravkan occupation. But one day, he returns home from sitting in the taverns and listening to the Fjerdans drink themselves to compromise, to see the older son sitting at a table with her, playing chess. Hears him say, offhandedly and with a tone that is just too light, that one day he will steal her away from her cold, cold husband.

The Darkling is about to make his presence known, when he hears Alina snort.

"I'm not luggage. I go where I want, and stay where I want."

He doesn't step forward. Instead, he quietly realizes for the first time that she has stayed for over forty years. That he wasn't the only one who could leave at any time during their diversion from war.

"I'll have your king, now."

The moments they have privacy are few and far between, and when they occur, little is said. Instead they fall together in crashes of lips and teeth, and she always falls asleep with her ear

pressed to the seam over his heart.

It takes six months before the Darkling finally hears of something that could be an opportunity. There is word, whispered word, hushed word, that there are still members of the Bol'shoy: resistance pockets that have been moving like-minded Ravkans out of the city, and gathering outside units of the army to force the Novoravkans from Os Alta.

When he tells Alina in one of their private moments, when her head is resting on his chest, she only nods.

He's not used to her being passive. Once, maybe, back in the lifetime where there was a collar and a Fold, it would have been an unexpected advantage.

But now is different. Now her name is Morozova, and he hears her silence so very loudly.

They spend their days in a slow fog. Every day the stew they pay for becomes more watered down, and the cold is more harshly felt in the drafts of their room. It has become constant practice, for the Darkling to remind himself that everything—*everything*—is only temporary. That soon they will have full meals and regular heat. Soon they will not have to share living space with a senile woman, a chatty boy, and an *otkazat'sya* who presumes too much. Soon Alina will stop moving from room to room like she's haunting it. Soon he will not have to hear Fjerdan-accented and broken Ravkan being barked at them by men holding rifles.

Soon, they will have it all.

After three more months of subtle questioning at a tavern on the outskirts of Os Alta, he meets an *otkazat'sya* named Yana.

Yana was once a sniper in the Bol'shoy. And she notices that his Fjerdan has a subtle difference in dialect from their occupiers. That he hesitates before following the orders of the men in black. That he quietly mutters *dlya* Ravka before taking a sip of his kvas.

Two more months after that, Yana whispers in his ear that it would be a wise idea to stay indoors that night.

The Darkling gives his first smile since arriving back in Ravka. It is finally time for them to make a second debut.

xlvi.

She's playing another game of chess with Kurt when Aleksander returns home. She doesn't know what he does during the day, when she goes to work to make enough wages to pay off the men in black and the housing owner, but there is something different about him tonight. For one, he

doesn't scowl at Kurt the way he normally does, like he's a burr in his heel that he must tolerate. Instead, his grey eyes meet hers and she sees something alive and electric, and she *knows* that tonight is the night.

"When." Is all she asks, moving her knight to once again take Kurt's king (he's remarkably terrible at the game—either because he lets her win, or because he can't see beyond two moves. Either option is bad).

"Now."

Alina takes a deep, steadying breath before she nods, looking at the black, worn king in the palm of her hand. "Alright."

He's somehow, in a city undergoing occupation no less, managed to find two old *kefta*. They aren't black, or gold. Instead they are a dark navy color, and she muses that these were probably the uniforms of the Bol'shoy Grisha before they all started to wear the standardized coats.

She runs her fingers over the long sleeves, over the sash that ties around the middle, and something about it feels right. Or at least, something about it hurts a little less.

"You look less like a ghost," is all Aleksander offers.

Alina supposes she does.

A few hours later, they hear gunfire and screams. And they follow the sound of bullets.

Alina's familiar with the old textile factory. It hasn't been used to produce textiles since the last time she was in Os Alta. Instead it's been repurposed. A lot of things have been repurposed by the Fjerdans and the Novoravkans. What used to be looms and workrooms are now hosts to meetings and war councils. It's a place where the border control of the city makes their base.

And right now, it's under attack.

The people who must be the remnants of the Bol'shoy wear no consistent uniform. They are clad in the ragged clothes of refugees, an assortment of darkly colored pieces. The force is small, and their tactics are questionable, since they're taking on what is practically an armored fortress from the ground. Bol'shoy hide behind fountains or market stalls as Fjerdan snipers pick them off like rabbits from the window.

She moves forward, but Aleksander grabs her arm.

"Not yet," is all he says in a clipped tone, barely audible over the exchanging sound of fire.

Alina scowls. "You'd rather wait until we're the only ones still standing?"

"I want to see if they have Grisha."

"Does that really matter right now?"

Aleksander gives a miniscule shake of his head. "Not the Bol'shoy. The Fjerdans."

She sends him a grim look. “The Fjerdans burn Grisha. Or did you forget?”

A stillness goes over his entire body, the fingers on her arm flex quickly. “No. I won’t forget.”

“Then let’s go.”

He doesn’t let go of her sleeve, instead he’s looking her over, checking for cracks.

Alina clenches her jaw. “Aleksander.”

His eyes snap back to her face.

“I’ll be fine.”

Aleksander releases a slow breath. “...I’ve never had a doubt.”

Alina snorts. “Then stop holding my arm like you’re about to pull the pin on a grenade.”

After a few seconds, and the sound of what appears to be a bomb or an Inferni and Squaller firing together, he drops his grip. He surprises her when he brings his mouth to hers in a quick, violent movement. His fingers wrap in her hair, and he presses his other hand between her shoulder blades to draw her closer. Before she can react, either to kiss him back or to shove him, he pulls away.

She blinks slowly, before shaking her head. Sunlight glows around her hands.

“*Dlya Ravka*,” she whispers.

Aleksander nods. “*Dlya Ravka*.”

They stand side by side, and it takes both sides a few moments to realize there are new performers on the stage. And that they are here to dance a waltz.

First step. Alina’s arm swings, and a flash of light draws a diagonal line down the length of the textile factory. Everything is still, too still, for a single handful of seconds before the top of the building slides off, and crashes to the ground.

Second step. Aleksander brings his arms overhead, and in a smooth, circular movement, crashes his palms together. A loud *boom* fills the area before everyone is plunged into darkness. Unlike the building, this is not still. Screams of confusion from both sides can be heard, but thankfully no one fires off any weapons.

The third, final step. A different set of screams are heard, and they only grow louder after the leathery noise of wings echoes throughout the darkness.

Alina stands still, as she hears the Fjerdans and Novoravkans cry out in the dark. She keeps her hands at her side, even though they tremble. And she takes slow breaths even though it feels like she can’t get enough air into her lungs. Her stomach twists and her throat burns. She hears the Fjerdan word for help screamed into the dark before it goes abruptly silent.

But she doesn’t perform her bow until they’ve finished. Once she feels Aleksander’s approval through their bond, she brings her arms up, and claps them together-*boom*. Light streams out in ribbons, wrapping around the shadows and the *nichevo’ya* and suffocating them with warm, golden movements.

Soon, there is only the two of them, the natural darkness of the night, and about thirty members of what was once the Bol'shoy, who are staring at them in mixtures of awe and horror. A few even drop to their knees.

Alina clears her throat. She doesn't look at what's left of the Fjerdans or Novoravkans, pieced together in the rubble. Instead, she keeps her eyes trained ahead. Like a soldier. Like an *Etherealki*. "We're here for Ravka."

An older woman with a sniper's rifle strapped over her back takes a hesitant step forward. Alina notices that she is sending Aleksander a speculative look, as if she's seen the face but can't place it.

"I am Yana Kirsanova. And I am a *Tovarish* of the Bol'shoy," she looks at the building behind both of them and it's a grim sort of smile that paints her lined features. "And I am glad you are not here for Fjerda."

The dance stops, and the march begins.

xlix.

What's left of the Bol'shoy has been making camp underground. For a brief moment, he sees the mouse girl once again when her nose wrinkles at the news.

Much like his first time with the Bol'shoy, no one knows quite what to make of them. But their story comes easily enough.

He is the illegitimate grandson of the famed Commander, who led the first marches onto Fjerdan soil and liberated the villages of what is now Novoravka.

She is his wife, and no, they don't know who her family is, or how she is able to accomplish what only the famed *Sankta* Alina could do. Yes, she was named after her, and yes it is a funny coincidence.

They are both Ravkan, though they hid in Fjerdan for safety when their village of Kopingbran surrendered.

It only takes the pair of them leading three successful guerilla strikes to be admitted into the inner circle. From there, it is made clear that they know what they are doing, that they wish to reclaim Os Alta in the quickest, most merciless way possible, and they are soon given positions of command.

He watches some life come back into her eyes as she gives orders. As she makes directives. As she creates drills for the Grisha members of the Bol'shoy to practice. As she does whatever she can to bring back Ravka to Ravkans.

Her taste for power runs differently from his own, but it seems as though it has finally managed to develop.

Yana is not the Commander of the Bol'shoy, but her elder sister is, and she arranges an introduction. Polina Kirsanova does not meet him in a garden, and does not have the regal stance of a queen. Instead, she slumps over a desk that is half rotted, with her fingers wrapped around a glass of vodka. She smells it like the former *Tsaritsa* would smell her roses, before it's tossed back in one swallow.

"You're the dark one."

His lips press together firmly.

Polina stares at him with cold, blue eyes. "The peasants talk about you. Quite a story they've managed to cook up. Would you like to hear it?"

The Darkling gives a small nod. "Stories have their purpose."

She returns the gesture. "They do. And we think this particular story has some advantages." She pours another glass of vodka. "The girl, is she really what they say?"

"She is a Sun Summoner, yes."

"No, I mean is she your wife?"

He frowns, but does not hesitate. "Yes."

Polina eyes him, but he has been glared at by far more powerful women, in far more powerful positions than a commander of a dying army. "She has no family?"

The Darkling keeps his tone even. "Once."

She dips her head, and takes another harsh swallow. "They think she's a Lanstov. A descendant of the *Sankta*." Polina snorts. "An orphan coming back to reclaim the throne."

He doesn't miss a beat in this silent offering. "And if she was?"

"Well, now. I'd say a prodigal Lantsov is a better figurehead for a resistance army than a retired Squaller." It's only now that he notices the tip of her nose is blue with broken veins. "Wouldn't you?"

He leans back in his chair. "Yes. I would."

Polina snorts from the back of her throat and drains the rest of her glass. "Then *dlya* fucking Ravka!"

He anticipates many things from Alina, but sometimes she still manages to take him by surprise.

"Alright," is all she says when he tells her of Polina's plan.

It's a tired word, but one that is accepting. When he thinks to ask her about it further, she only rolls her eyes.

"I *have* commanded armies before."

"This means they will try to give you the throne."

Alina sighs, and goes back to her clumsy knitting. “I’ve already had a throne, too.”

They make her a figurehead with surprisingly little time. The Durasts (all five of them, this rebellion has not been kind to those of the small science) begin construction of *kefta* for the Grisha members of the Bol’shoy, which is explained as a necessity due to the Grisha being the first target of snipers. *Kefta*, can deflect bullets, after all.

They debate what the new sigil will be. Finally, it is decided that the banner of the reformed Bol’shoy, controlled by the orphan Lantsov, will be a red dog howling at a pale silver moon.

It’s Alina’s design. And the clench of the Darkling’s jaw only relaxes when the soldiers take quickly to it. No one has forgotten that the famed *Korol Rezni* of legend, the Fox Tsar that was married to the Sankta the Lantsovs descended from, flew colors as a privateer first: a red dog on a teal field.

The pale moon, Alina explains to him quietly as the *otkazat’sya* soldiers slip on new armbands over their coats, is an addition for a reason. Neither gold, nor black. Light nor shadow. Something in between.

...He’ll tolerate it on his *kefta*, until Os Alta is back under control. Until black uniforms are no longer associated with Novoravkans.

All the *kefta* are the same shade of navy blue.

The outskirts of Os Alta are disorganized by their occupiers. And it is easy to remove them from the board, piece by piece. Patiently. Smoking them out like they are pests. He feels nothing as he hears the screams of dying Fjerdan and Novoravkans. He notices that Alina has stopped trembling whenever she sees a rifle.

Slowly, they improve. They gain ground. And after every conquered outpost, the Darkling and Alina balance the euphoria of using their powers by using each other wherever they can.

They reach the outside heart of Os Alta on the longest day of the summer: the *Sankt* Quarter. It is where they keep the royal graves.

I.

She finds it by accident.

Nightmares are not uncommon for Alina. Not after the camp. Not after Kopingbran. She wakes in a cold sweat, unable to remember anything from this particular one except that she was putting bodies onto a pyre. That alone is enough to keep her from rest for the night. Beside her, Aleksander is still. His breath is even. She can’t understand how easily he sleeps, night after night after night.

How nothing he's done can wake him.

Would it be so terrible, Alina, to be like me?

She shivers, rotating so she can step out of their bed. As the new (former) commander of the Bol'shoi, her quarters are slightly better than the rest of the Tovarish. Hers has a door. And only one place in the ceiling where it leaks.

Alina runs her fingers through her mostly still-brown hair. On Polina's suggestion, she has started to let it grow back out white. And at the moment, it's a mess of colors. It's horrible, and she can almost hear Genya making a strangled noise in the back of her head.

Alina stands and moves to gather her clothes. She knows she won't be able to go back to sleep, and is in need of a distraction. Any distraction.

She is pulling her *kefta* over her head when she feels a stare. Alina shrugs the rest of the garment on, before she turns and sees Aleksander's grey eyes trained on her. He's lying propped up on an elbow and blinking sleep from his eyes.

"Where are you going?" It comes out still raspy with sleep.

"Out," she replies calmly, fingers lacing the sash tightly around her middle.

"It's late."

She pulls her hair back and turns her attention from him. "Can't sleep."

He is quiet, and as she laces her boots, she thinks he's gone back to bed. Until she hears his voice once again, cutting through the shadows just like her summons.

"...Are you coming back?"

Her eyes flicker from her boots to the door. She bites down on her lower lip. "...yes."

She hears the creak of the mattress as he rolls onto his back. And Alina can practically visualize him running his hand through his hair. "Don't go."

Alina stands. "It's just a walk."

The sound of the door closing is quiet, final, and hollow.

The sun is just starting to peek when Alina steps out of the hidden encampment and onto the streets of Os Alta. It's dangerous, she knows, to be walking around in the open in her navy blue *kefta*, but she also knows she is equally dangerous. And maybe part of her is trying to find some trouble, some new obstacle to overcome, so she doesn't have to think about what the words *assassination* or *haxa* mean.

She very rarely made trips to the *Sankt* Quarter during her time as Alina Starkov, and less so as Alina Lantsov. For a living saint, she discovered she had little use for ceremony or religion. Maybe it's because over time, she made the simple realization that every martyr they prayed to was once alive. But she needs somewhere quiet to gather her thoughts, and there is nowhere quiet in Os Alta except for where its people go to bury their dead.

Alina walks for what seems like hours, where the streets are darkest, before she turns a corner and

sees her former husband.

Alina's eyes widen, and her feet somehow manage to move toward it even though she can't quite believe what's in front of her. The statue of Nikolai Lantsov is carved in what appears to be white marble and accentuated with patchwork golden leaf. And it's beyond garish.

The rising sun glistens off of his hair, forming an almost beatific halo. He is eternally sculpted as he was when Alina first met him, wearing an outfit that could only be described as *rakish*, with a golden cape around his shoulders and a saber held aloft in his left hand. His face in profile is so like him it hurts, from the tilt of his grin to the crinkles of laughter around his eyes. The only remarkable difference is the addition of a stylish goatee she doesn't remember him ever sporting in life.

Her eyes are already welling with tears when she notices that his statue is not alone. Besides the dashing, tacky depiction of Nikolai is a matching likeness. And her tears transform into full out barks of laughter when she realizes who it's supposed to be.

The likeness of *Sankta Alina* is also carved into marble and gold leaf, wearing both a dutiful, solemn expression and a solitary tear on her cheek as she generously spreads her hands to the pack of cherub orphans clinging to her feet. What appears to be doves are sitting on her marble shoulders, all six of whom have an olive branch in their beaks.

She's laughing so hard she's nearly sobbing, and Alina has to brace herself against the base of Nikolai's statue in order to catch her breath. It's only then that she realizes the statues have inscriptions engraved on brass plaques. Alina goes down onto one knee, still laughing, and reads the one for hers.

First of her name, Tsaritsa Alina Lantsov. Patron Sankta of Lost Causes, Sad Orphans, and Marrying Up.

Alina snorts, using the back of her hand to wipe away the tears that are either from laughter or sobs, before turning to read his.

Third of his name, Tsar Nikolai Lantsov. Still the pretty one.

The hand wiping away her tears goes to cover her mouth, failing to stifle the choked gasp she emits when old wounds suddenly reopen. Alina sinks to her other knee, and for the first time in what feels like decades, she finally allows the harsh, wracking sobs she has put aside for so long to escape her body.

He's not there to hold her as she cries, but she sits in front of their ugly statues and lets the catharsis he helped her discover take its hold instead.

The two statues stand outside of a white building, marked by a golden sunburst. It is the headquarters of The *Soldat Sol*, a charity that gives support to children orphaned by war. Including a significant amount of funding that is donated to Keramzin. The statues were commissioned by Ana Lantsov, Fourth of her name, after following a clause in her father's will.

They—the *Sol*, the statues, Keramzin—are untouched by Novoravka's revolution.

She doesn't know how long she's been lying there, collapsed in front of the no doubt ugliest

statues in Ravka, when she feels him approach. Alina's not surprised to sense his anger through their tether, or his relief when he realizes that she hasn't quite left him yet.

"You didn't come back." His words sound accusatory, blaming. Alina can't find it in herself to care. Not when it feels like she's suddenly taken off a yoke or a brick or both.

"I didn't leave, either." Her eyes are red rimmed, and her voice is harsh from tears. She feels boneless and lighter, all at once.

Aleksander kneels beside her, and as he reaches to touch the back of her neck, she shakes her head. He frowns, but retracts his hand, instead looking at what she's leaning against.

Due to who they are, what they are, she can sense his emotions even though none are betrayed on his face. Anger, at her leaving this morning after he asked her not to. Fear, when she did not come back. And dark, seething jealousy as he realizes what it is that's in front of him.

"They're hideous," is all he says, fingers tightening in the fabric of his *kefta* so he doesn't make a fist.

Alina gives a watery smile. "They are."

"You're different."

She looks up once again into that chiseled, golden face with a ridiculous goatee. "...a little."

Aleksander extends his hand in front of her. "Come."

Wordlessly, Alina takes it, and allows him to help her stand.

He takes her to a graveyard.

Not just any graveyard.

The royal plot has somehow managed to be spared desecration, and as Aleksander leads her, hand in the crook of his elbow, Alina starts to recognize the names. Malyen. Anton. Boris. Tatiana. Vasilisa. Ivan. Her breath comes in ragged as he finally stops in front of four.

Misha Lantsov.

Ana Lantsov.

Nikolai Lantsov.

And, finally, Alina Lantsov.

"Why?" She finally manages to whisper, her eyes trained on the names. Her knees feeling weak and unable to support her own weight.

Aleksander sends her a sidelong glance, before he draws her to him. Alina is numb as he brings his arms around her, as he presses a kiss to the top of her head.

"Tell me of them."

She squeezes her eyes close. And does not know why he wants to know. Why he wants her to talk

about them. But she moves back from him, and her water-blurred eyes take stock of the names, all of them. All of the pieces of her heart that she has not allowed herself to think about in some time. She feels raw and exposed, looking at engraved stone. As weathered as the edges of the lettering on it.

She clears her throat. “Malyen was our first grandchild. Misha and Svetlana’s son. He...” Alina looks down. She doesn’t need to remember, because these names are things she carried. But it is the first time she’s ever spoken of them, to anyone, and it means she needs rests before she can continue. “Used to drive the cooks crazy. He’d sneak cakes, all hours of the night, even in his sleep. We’d get him up in the morning and he’d just be covered in sugar.”

Alina needs to sit. So she does. And Aleksander stands behind her, silent.

Alina can feel the tears rolling down her cheeks, as she looks at the next one. “Vasilia was Ana’s daughter. And Ivan’s. She looked so much like Genya—beautiful red hair. Men wrapped around her finger before she was even ten years old. Ivan hated it, but then again, Ivan hated most things.”

Her voice cracks. “Ana. Was a privateer, for a few years. Non-sanctioned. She thought I didn’t notice when our schooners suddenly disappeared for months at a time. I did, but Nikolai...”

He crouches behind her, and takes her into his arms again. And he waits, as only he can, for her to make it through all the names. For her to cry all the tears she has left. She has no idea how long they stay there, but every name wears her down like a stone against the edge of a knife, until she is nothing but blunt edges. Until she is no longer tempered steel, but something unformed and broken. A cup, that couldn’t hold water, but might be able to now that she sees where it needs mending.

They stay at the graves until she falls asleep, and then he carries her once more.

Time heals all things, even Alina Starkov.

Six months later, they retake the Little Palace. Three days after that, the Grand.

li.

Rulers are replaced, kingdoms fall, but palaces remain unchanged save for the portraits hanging in the halls. As Aleksander walks throughout the Little Palace once more, he muses again that this place is no different—its fine carpets are the same, the chandeliers, and the gardens, too.

There is even still a small hut on the grounds, down by the shoreline.

And that’s where he finds her.

The evening Os Alta officially belongs to Ravka again is an evening of celebration. It’s an evening of kvas and vodka, but instead of being involved in the festivities, Alina is instead curled up by the fire of Baghra’s hut. Her hair is white again, beautiful and unbound and hanging around her shoulders.

She does not look away from the fire. And Aleksander does not look away from her as he stands to her side, leaning against the wall of his mother's hut.

"It looks like you've made a ruler of me again," Alina mutters to the flames, resting her chin on the heel of her hand.

He watches her like a hawk might eye a mouse. "This time I only took the army that belonged to me."

She snorts, closing her eyes. She fidgets with the ends of the sleeves of her *kefta*. It is of Ravkan make. "You've made an impression. Polina has requested that I make you my Consort."

His jaw clenches. *Consort*. "And are you obliging that request?"

Alina frowns in contemplation. "I've never had a Consort before."

"Alina."

She keeps her eyes closed. "Someone once told me there was nothing wrong with being a lizard, unless you were born to be a hawk."

The words twist something within him, and he remembers a woman telling him the same thing as a child. What could have possibly been a millennia ago.

"...I have so many reasons to hate you, Aleksander," she whispers.

He glares at her, the beginnings of a scowl on his lips. "Is that what you need, Alina. Do you still need a villain?"

She bites down on her lower lip. "Would you like to be one?"

The question surprises him, and he turns to look at the fire. It takes him a moment to reply. "I would like balance."

"What would you do for that balance?"

"Anything."

Alina groans, finally turning to look up at him. "You don't make anything easy, do you?"

Aleksander returns the stare. "I forget your unparalleled ability for compromise."

She shakes her head, brushing off her *kefta* before standing. She matches his lean, and does not draw closer to him. "There is no balance without war. I've learned that."

His lips twitch. "Then there will be war."

Alina doesn't break their eye contact. "Then I suppose I have to keep an eye on you."

Aleksander steps forward, and one of his long fingers curls under her chin, tipping it up. Her hair gleams like an ember with the reflected fire, and he can only think of Kopingbran. Of the scar on his chest. The marks on her shoulder.

"What do you want, Alina?"

"I want to rest," she says sadly. "I want this to be clear. I want a Keramzin that has never been

burned down, a Ravka left alone, a Fjerdan camp that I never Cut, and to know that this is what I should be doing. I want to know that taking this throne is what is best for Ravka, and not just something I need because I'm tired of feeling guilty and heartbroken."

Her eyebrows furrow as she traces her thumb over the scars that mar his face, "...I want to be someone who can stop hating you. Because I think I am starting to understand all of you. And that terrifies me."

He takes his fingers from her chin to hover over her own against his face. He brings her hand to his lips, and kisses every finger in slow movements. Then he presses her hand to his chest, to that scar, to the pounding of his heart. "What I want...is to stop being alone, Alina."

Her eyes start to water. "I want to stop being alone, too."

"And you are the only one I want to be with." He brings her hand up again to kiss her palm. "So stop hating me."

Alina closes her eyes, and her voice is a broken whisper. "...Okay."

For the first time in centuries, she initiates a kiss.

Later, they lay together on the floor of Baghra's old hut, watching the fires burn down to ash.

The next morning is her coronation.

lii.

Her coronation is a simple affair. There are no red carpets, no two hour speeches, no Apparatus wheezing about her head. Instead, there is only Alina, Aleksander (her Consort, though she somehow knows he does not intend to be *just* her Consort for long), and the inner circle of the Bol'shoy.

It's Polina, bleary-eyed and hung over, that is to place a crown on her head.

"Alright. I, with the power of the Bol'shoy and an Os Alta not really in a state to argue differently, now pronounce you Tsaritsa Morozova--"

"No," Alina says firmly. "Not Tsaritsa."

Aleksander frowns beside her.

And she looks at him, a determination burning somewhere in the depths of her gaze as she laces her fingers through his, "Just Sankta."

He rubs his thumb over her knuckles, before he brings them to his lips. "...The Sankta," he agrees, after a moment of contemplation.

Polina frowns, but shrugs and lowers the crown anyways. And with hands held together, Aleksander leads her to the dais. She takes the first step, before he follows.

They rule longer than anyone has a right to, on two thrones that sit at equal height.

He is the tide, moving forward, washing away whatever is in its path. And she is the moon, drawing him back. As forces of opposition, they will always have war.

But at night, instead of the lonely disquiet of the shadows, or the abandonment of burning lamps, they manage to have each other.

liii.

You were meant to be my balance, Alina. You are the only person in the world who might rule with me, who might keep my power in check.

Chapter End Notes

Glossary

Russian words and expressions (again not even close to a native speaker, so apologies if I butchered anything—please let me know if I did and I’ll be happy to fix it!):

Moya zhená = My wife

Gospodin = Mr.

Sol-nyshka moyo = My sun (always said with a mocking tone when used by the Darkling)

Bol’shoy = Big or grand

Dlya Ravka = For Ravka

Tovarish = Comrade/friend

Skazki = Literal translation is “stories”, but used in reference to fairy tales

Swedish words/expressions (ty twimatt for the assists!)

Det Vita Offret: The White Sacrifice in Swedish

Skål: Cheers!

Häxa: Witch

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